

Altina the Sword Princess: Volume 4

Yukiya Murasakai

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ALTINA
the Sword Princess
IV





Bibliophagic Tactician
Regis

Sword-Wielding Princess
Altina

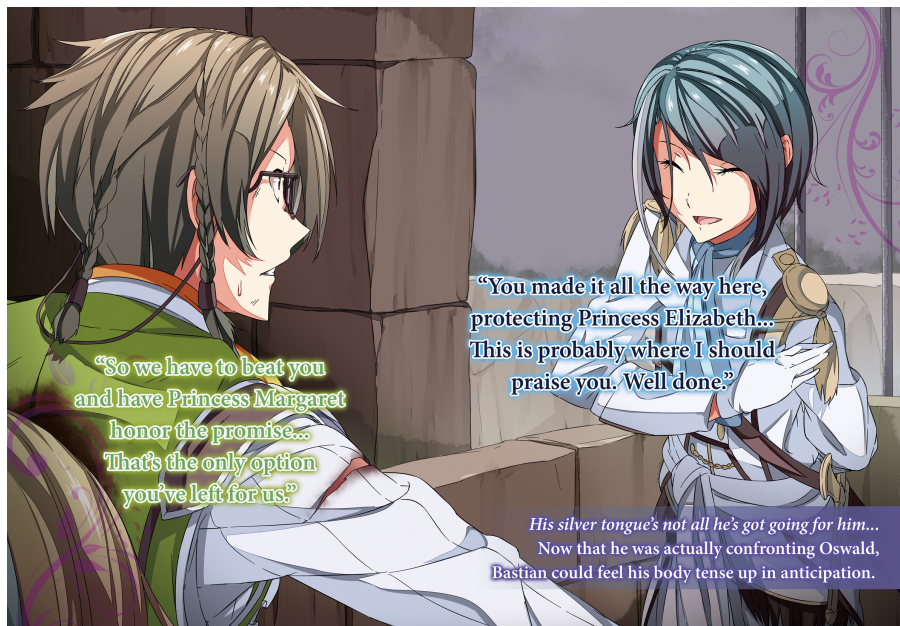
“Regis, what
do you think?”

“...I propose we
end things tonight.”

“Kukukuh...
So we’re going out, then?”

Banished Hero
Jerome





"So we have to beat you
and have Princess Margaret
honor the promise...
That's the only option
you've left for us."

"You made it all the way here,
protecting Princess Elizabeth...
This is probably where I should
praise you. Well done."

*His silver tongue's not all he's got going for him...
Now that he was actually confronting Oswald,
Bastian could feel his body tense up in anticipation.*

ALINA the Sword Princess





Marie Quatre Argentina de Belgaria

Fourth princess of the Belgarian Empire. She was named after her mother's homeland of Argentina, and is known as "Altina" for short. Boasting red hair and crimson eyes, she swings around the Grand Tonnerre Quatre, a sword even taller than she is.

She has resolved to try and become the next empress for the sake of those suffering under the Empire's tyranny.



Clarisse

A maid six years older than Altina who has been by the princess's side for as long as she can remember. Altina trusts her from the depths of her heart. While Clarisse is usually silent like a doll, she tends to joke incessantly with anyone she's taken a liking to.

Regis Aurick

Fifth-grade administrative officer.

A bibliophile who dreamed of becoming a librarian in the military library. He was an abject failure in the military academy, unable to swing a sword, draw a bow, or even ride a horse. The abundance of knowledge he has obtained from his books does give him some talent as a tactician, however.





Eddie Fabio de Balzac

First-grade combat officer. The new head of the House of Balzac, famous for its outstanding swordsmanship. Despite having inherited his house's aptitude for swordplay, Eddie has never cut down a person on the battlefield. The sword he carries, the Défendre Sept, has been passed down in his family since the days of the first emperor.

Carlos Liam Auguste de Belgaria

First prince of the Belgarian Empire. While being first in line to the throne, he was sickly from birth.

After coughing up blood and collapsing following a banquet, he disappeared from the public eye for an extended period of time, but has since made his return.





Eric
Mickaël de
Blanchard

A Belgarian knight and the grandson of Everard. While serving in Marquis Thénézay's army, he was deeply impressed by Regis's command, and personally volunteered to be sent to the front lines to chase after the man he respected so much.

Jerome Jean de Beilschmidt



Revered as an accomplished general, he was driven to the border by those envious of his achievements. He would spend his days as the de facto commander of Fort Sierck drinking and gambling, but he surrendered this position when Altina bested him in a duel.





Heinrich Trois Bastian de Belgaria

Third prince of the Belgarian Empire. Detesting the very notion of getting involved in power struggles, he left Belgaria to study in High Britannia. Frustrated that his siblings were being handed treasured swords left and right, he may or may not have secretly made off with the Vite Espace Trois.

Elizabeth Victoria



A member of High Britannia's royal family who falsified her identity so that she could attend school as a normal student. Highly intelligent and a resolute pacifist, she is respected by those around her and even holds the prestigious title of honor student.





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The story so far—

Inept with a sword, unable to ride a horse, and apathetic toward the empire he serves, Regis Aurick is a hopeless soldier who spends his days buried in books.

The year is 850 on the Belgarian imperial calendar—

Having been banished to Fort Sierck on the northern front, Regis was approached by the tenacious Fourth Princess Marie Quatre Argentina de Belgaria—“Altina” for short—a stunning young woman whose imperial lineage was denoted by her crimson hair and red eyes. The daughter of a commoner, she was shunned by the queen and other high nobles, eventually being appointed commander of a faraway border regiment at the unprepared age of fourteen.

Under normal circumstances, her time would have been spent idly, the empty title making her little more than a decoration. But the impassioned princess, having spent her adolescence caught between internal struggles for power, aspired for something greater. She had seen the strife caused by self-seeking nobles—the ruthless taxation and pointless wars—and so resolved to change the country!

And so Altina sought out Regis, hoping he would agree to become her tactician.

“I’m going to become empress. I need your wisdom.”

In her pursuit of the throne, Altina must first prove her strength to the border regiment she strives to command in more than just name—her apprehensive would-be strategist included. To this end, she challenges their de-facto commander, the general and hero Jerome, to a duel...

...and comes out victorious.

Moved by her display of strength and resolve, Regis finally places his trust in the princess, swearing to work as her tactician.

But, immediately after the duel, Fort Sierck is attacked by barbarians! Having moved under the cover of a blizzard, they were able to launch a surprise attack.

Regis, now assuming the position of strategist, proposes a plan that would not only drive away the invading barbarians, but capture their presumed leader as well.

“But the tricky part is, unlike in chess, soldiers in real combat won’t always move as they’re ordered. Soldiers stand on the battlefield under a delicate balance of ambition and fear.”

The battle carries out as anticipated, and the man known as the “barbarian king” is captured. He introduces himself as Diethardt, and proclaims his horde to be the nation of Bargaenheim.

Despite it being regular practice in the empire to either hang or make slaves of captured barbarians, Regis recognizes their potential and, aware that his own forces are nowhere near strong enough to put Altina on the throne, requests their help. In exchange, the regiment will support and acknowledge Bargaenheim as a sovereign nation.

The dialogue in the courtyard ends in success as Diethardt agrees to lend his support.

«Imperial Princess Marie Quatre. I offer you my thanks, and promise my utmost assistance toward your ambition.»

And so the year turns to 851 on the Belgarian imperial calendar—

As news spreads that their border regiment has gained the cooperation of barbarians, Altina receives an unreasonable request from the commander of the Belgarian military—her brother, Second Prince Latrielle:

You are to capture Fort Volks in the Grand Duchy of Varden of the Germania Federation.

His true objective is undoubtedly to weaken Altina’s forces; the fortress is notorious for being impregnable, so it would be simply absurd for the small force on the border to attempt an attack.

A crushing defeat would be inevitable in a head-on collision, and should the regiment refuse to act, they would be branded as traitors.

As they are further pressured to act, Regis recalls an old military strategy he once read about in a book, and puts together a plan to take the fortress.

Luck is on their side, and the scheme unfolds largely as planned. While not without casualties, the border regiment successfully captures Fort Volks under Altina’s command.

And half a month after that, a new letter from the prince arrives:

This coming April, as I’m sure you know, we will hold a celebration to commemorate the founding of our nation. Marie Quatre Argentina is invited to attend. This is Father’s wish. I look forward to the day our family shall be reunited once more.

“I’ll go to the capital. Even if nothing but darkness awaits me there!”

And so Altina returns to La Branne, the imperial palace located in the capital, accompanied by Regis, who is nervous but also excited to

witness the place where many a tale has been set.

But this is hardly the time to enjoy the sights and celebrations. Latrielle plots to absorb Altina and her growing number of supporters into his own camp, while First Prince Auguste enlarges his faction by allying with the *nouveau noblesse* to the south. Altina is fourth in line to the throne—she can't become empress without overcoming them both.

Third Prince Bastian, however, has completely abstained from the power struggle, instead choosing to study abroad in the neighboring nation of High Britannia.

Regis is initially overwhelmed. That is, until he notices that Auguste is actually the late first prince's younger sister, Felicia, in disguise. Regis uses this fact to topple Latrielle's scheme to secure the throne, breaking through the stalemate and gaining the cooperation of the assertive Elenore Ailred Winn de Tirasio Laverde—more commonly known as the Vixen of the South.

The result? Auguste rescinds his right as next in line to the throne, expressing his desire for Altina to take his place.

As tensions rise, Regis and Altina flee the capital on horseback, accompanied by Felicia (who is still posing as Auguste) and her protector, Eddie.

In a desperate attempt to regain control over the situation, Germain—Latrielle's tactician—sends the First Army's White Wolf Brigade to retrieve Auguste, hoping to expose his true identity and undermine his recommendation of Altina. But the plan backfires; Altina's army defeats the White Wolves, further cementing her as a viable candidate to take the throne.

Altina is now closer to her goal of becoming empress than ever before, but an even bigger issue is soon to arise...

Preface 1: Looming Thunder

Imperial Year 851, late April—

It was still unpleasantly cold in the north. The layer of snow from the night before melted by dawn, dampening the rocky outer walls.

Regis Aurick was fast asleep in his room at Fort Volks, when he was awakened by a faint stream of sunlight spilling in through a small hole in the wall. As he sat up, the book he had fallen asleep reading slipped from his chest. He reflexively caught it before it could fall to the ground.

“Mn... Nn... Morning?”

He reluctantly parted with the thin blanket that had been wrapped around him, embracing his shoulders as if to shield himself from the cold that greeted him as he stepped out of bed. He then carefully weaved between the stacks of paperwork at his feet, making his way to his writing desk.

Upon reaching it, he removed the glass chimney from the oil lamp—which was also surrounded by papers—to expose the wick. In the dim morning light, he groped around until he had procured his tinderbox. It was a brilliant red box with a small drawer in it, and he had received it from Altina on his birthday just a few days before, on April 23rd.

He opened the drawer and took out some flint, as well as a wooden splint. Once he had them, he took the lid off of the tinderbox, revealing two small compartments: one that contained a small piece of metal, and another containing tinder. By striking the flint against the metal, he could direct sparks into the tinder-filled compartment, which kindled a weak ember.

Regis brought the splint over to the ember, and the flame effortlessly spread to its tip. He then carefully ferried the lit splint over to the oil lamp’s wick, taking extra care to ensure it didn’t go out. The second it touched the wick, light filled the room, and Regis hurriedly put the glass chimney back in place.

While Fort Volks did have the minimum number of small apertures necessary to navigate its tunnels, the amount of light they let in was insufficient for doing paperwork. For this reason, oil lamps were necessary even at the height of day.

Had today been any colder, Regis would have also used the still-burning splint to light his fireplace, but... even a small scrap of

kindling wood was a valuable resource. He could see his breath, but his hands weren't numb, so Regis pressed the splint into an iron ashtray to extinguish it.

As he placed the lid back on the tinderbox, the embers in the tinder-filled compartment were immediately snuffed out. He then returned the remaining tools to their respective places, before putting the tinderbox back where he had found it.

After stripping off his pajamas, Regis reached a hand toward the uniform hung on the wall—the uniform of the Beilschmidt border regiment, and one he had grown considerably accustomed to. It had a lot of buttons, which proved to be somewhat of a pain, but it was the perfect protection from the cold.

The insignia on his shoulder hadn't changed; back in the capital, the supreme commander of Belgaria's army, General Latrielle, had said he would promote Regis to a third-grade administrative officer. Unfortunately, the decree had yet to come, so he was still no more than a fifth-grade officer.

Perhaps he changed his mind... After all, right after that talk, not only had Regis found himself on the run from the First Army's White Wolf Brigade, he had been responsible for at least half of them being incinerated. That would definitely be hard for Latrielle to overlook.

While a little disheartened by the raise he had missed out on, Regis valued his safety over an increase in salary. Not to mention that Regis's self-confidence was still so low that he considered it a miracle he hadn't been sacked yet. It went without saying that, as a soldier, he was about as much use as an elderly porter; his swordplay was worse than that of an untrained child, he was unable to draw a bow, and he couldn't even ride a horse.

As he was midway through changing, Regis's eyes scanned the desk.

"Huh?"

There was a document there he had never seen before—a report of a dispute within the regiment.

While the regiment Regis was stationed in was officially recognized as the Beilschmidt border regiment, ever since Altina—more formally known as Fourth Princess Marie Quatre Argentina de Belgaria—had assumed command, it was additionally being called "Marie Quatre's Army." But although the princess's swordplay skills were first-rate, she was still just a fourteen-year-old girl. She would be fifteen come May, but regardless, she was just a child.

The combat unit was headed by Jerome Jean de Beilschmidt. He was a knight hailed as a hero, and he possessed a daring nature that had him charging to the very frontlines of any battlefield.

Neither he nor Altina really cared about what they considered to

be trivial details; some would say this made them leaders who had an eye for the big picture, but others would call it an excuse to be somewhat sloppy...

Perhaps that style of command had worked out fine back when a majority of their forces consisted of regular imperial soldiers who knew one another. But Marie Quatre's Army now had many newcomers among its ranks: soldiers who had been stationed in Fort Volks before its occupation, and mercenaries from far-off lands. Some had even joined accompanied by subordinates of their own.

They were in a situation where disputes were breaking out between the new and old soldiers, but the amalgamation of people from different cultures almost always caused some degree of conflict. Soldiers weren't emotionless game pieces; more people meant more trouble.

Resolving any instance of discontent would require tender and open-minded care catered to each particular case. But Regis did not have that sort of time. This regiment had an overwhelming lack of administrative officers, meaning he was nearly the only one settling its organization and supply chain, alongside laying the groundwork for the plans he anticipated he would need.

That was why he had borrowed some help. The name of the person who had processed the report could be seen on the document placed on his desk.

"...Did Lillim drop by?"

"Verily," came a voice from amidst the mountains of documents. Regis scampered back as he was taken by complete surprise.

"Wuh!?"

"If you would pardon my intrusion," said the girl as her head abruptly sprouted up. She looked like a child wearing a maid costume. Her skin was tan, while her hair was as dark as the night sky. She was still young, but Lillim worked as the head maid for First Prince Auguste.



Under normal circumstances, she would have had nothing to do with the Beilschmidt border regiment, but, valuing her talent when it came to arbitration, Regis had entrusted her with the task of resolving conflicts within the unit.

Lillim stood up, brushing the dust off of her uniform. “Very sorry. When I came to deliver some documents this morning, you were very soundly asleep.”

“Y-Yeah... In which case, you could have just left after putting them on my desk.”

“Of course. That was my intention, but...”

“But...?”

“When I saw you sleeping so peacefully, I grew oh-so very sleepy myself.”

As far as reasons went, that didn’t sound very convincing. But there was no denying she had been working hard.

Regis quickly leafed through the document. She had done a good job summarizing all of the issues, and her proposed solutions seemed appropriate enough.

“...I see. Thank you.”

She broke into a very drowsy grin. “Glad to be of service!”

Then, there was a knock at the door, accompanied by a familiar voice. “Mr. Regis, are you awake?”

“Yeah.”

In the doorway appeared a young knight with luxurious blond hair, calming blue eyes, and a soothing, almost effeminate voice. It was Eric Mickaël de Blanchard. He was still only sixteen years old, but as the age of adulthood in the Belgarian Empire was fifteen, he was already considered a fine and very capable knight.

He had no brothers, and his father had passed away; if he wanted to protect the traditions of his family, he had no choice but to succeed the House of Blanchard himself. Though it did appear that there were some peculiar circumstances surrounding that.

“Good morning, Mr. Re—” Upon entering the room, Eric froze up like a wax statue, at a complete loss for words.

Regis looked over, confused by Eric’s sudden reaction. And then everything clicked into place; he had been distracted partway through changing. The blood rushed to Regis’s face.

“Ah, no... This is, you see—”

“How could this be!? For Mr. Regis to have removed his trousers in the presence of a child!”

“This is just a terrible misunderstanding, Eric. If you’d just calm down for a moment—”

“I could understand this kind of behavior if you were with Clarisse

or the princess, but such a young girl!?”

“Mn?” Lillim cocked her head to the side, a quizzical look on her face.



“Ahahahahahah!”

Laughter erupted from the officers’ dining hall in Fort Volks. Altina was clutching her stomach, tears forming in her eyes.

“...It’s nothing to laugh about...” Regis sighed. “I quite nearly died there. Socially speaking, that is.”

“M-My apologies,” Eric said, looking as ashamed as could be.

Regis, Altina, and Eric were seated at a table, while Clarisse waited on them. Lillim had to arrange breakfast for her own master, Prince Auguste—well, Felicia—so she was presumably hard at work in the prince’s room.

Incidentally, Felicia had requested that her guard, Eddie Fabio de Balzac, share the room with her. While they had both done their best to deny it, the two were quite clearly lovers, so no one was particularly bothered by the request. And as far as the regular soldiers were concerned, this was just a prince and a duke sharing a room. They were both male, so there was nothing suspicious about it. Well, there probably wasn’t.

That aside, upon hearing about the completely baseless misunderstanding surrounding Regis and Lillim, Altina had burst into laughter.

“Ahahahah... Oh, my stomach... It hurts... Ahah... Ahh... Well, I’m glad Regis isn’t into that sort of thing.”



“Of course not.”

“Then, how about you tell me what you’re actually into for once?”

“...R-Rather than waste our time on such a trifling matter, we should focus on the mountain of other, far more important issues we have to discuss. Even the time we have for breakfast shouldn’t be carelessly frittered away.”

“Tsk.” Altina tutted very deliberately, but received no reaction from Regis, who mercilessly continued to redirect the topic of conversation.

“Now then... As you know, last night we received news of the death of the queen of High Britannia.”

“Right.” Altina corrected her posture.

“...The urgent message arrived on the 25th, and reported that she had died on the 15th.”

Meaning, the queen had died on the first day Belgaria had been celebrating its anniversary. Her death was an important event on the international stage, but the transmission of such information usually took some time; when a lookout spotted an enemy, they could spread the news using smoke signals or noises, but more detailed messages could only be conveyed through letters which were carried by horse.

On well-maintained highways, transmission could be sped up by changing horses at each relay station, but this practice was hard to implement on the front lines. It was 23 lieue (100 km) between the border town of Theonveil and Fort Volks; not only were there no stations set up between them, there was also a forest inhabited by barbarians in the way.

Altina had made a secret agreement with Diethardt, known as the “Barbarian King,” so all Belgian soldiers would most likely be able to pass through safely. But as she couldn’t make it public that she had joined hands with barbarians, the unaware messenger would have made sure to traverse the forest with the utmost caution, which would inevitably take even more time.

That said, the difficulty of passing on information wasn’t entirely a bad thing. It meant, for instance, that collusion wasn’t a very pressing issue. And even if collusion did take place, transmitting information to outsiders would be near impossible, as straying from one’s station or battalion was especially conspicuous.

In a large army, it wasn’t strange for one or two spies to be among its ranks—this was common sense, so a well-trained unit made sure to keep close tabs on its members. For this reason, a conspirator trying to sneak out for a secret talk was just as likely to be caught as an enemy who tried to crawl into their midst, if not more so.

Had a convenient method of conveying information not dependent

on physical means been invented, the situation would have been completely different.

“... High Britannia is a nation ruled by a queen, but run by a parliament. If they’re following tradition, then the monarch’s death will have been followed by a week of mourning, after which the next queen should be announced by Parliament.”

“Parliament?” Altina asked.

“They’re somewhat similar to the ministers we have in Belgaria, but their authority is much stronger. For instance, when the queen gives an order, if at least twenty-four of the thirty members of Parliament speak against it, her order will be refused.”

“Huh, that’s amazing!”

“...Well, you could say it’s a safety measure put in place to prevent tyranny. Generally speaking, most policy matters tend to divide opinion pretty evenly, so in the end, the queen is granted the final say regardless.”

“Oh, I see. But that’s still a pretty interesting system.”

“Each new queen is supposed to be chosen by her predecessor and then approved by Parliament. It sounded as though the late queen’s death wasn’t an unexpected one; she passed away peacefully on her sickbed, so she has presumably already selected her successor.”

“Is that important?”

“Well, consider it like this: if a queen is able to choose her successor, then we can presume there will be no large-scale political changes. Although, looking at it from another angle, had this been a premeditated murder...”

“Gotcha.” Altina nodded. She may not have been particularly well read when it came to politics, but she was no fool.

“...It seems Prince Latrielle has come to the same conclusion. He hasn’t sent any reinforcements to the border we share with High Britannia. Well, the Second Army’s already stationed there, but... at the very least, we haven’t received any orders out here.”

“I see. What do you think he should do, Regis?”

“...I think he made the right move, perhaps? Sending a large army to a nation’s border so soon after it’s lost its leader would only serve to cause unnecessary tensions. Maybe if we were looking for an excuse to go to war, but right now we should really be avoiding any hostilities with High Britannia.”

“They’ve got their hands on all sorts of amazing technology these days.”

“Yeah. The invention of the steam engine was a large contributor to that; the railway and steamboat seriously increased the speed of distribution, and speeding up distribution hastens progress as it also speeds up the circulation of people, goods, and information... Right.

Let's say that, in the future, some form of technology is developed that lets you instantly converse with far-away people. Human lives would change at an unthinkable, dizzying pace."

"Converse with... far-away people?"

"I can't even imagine it."

"You mean, like... talking really, *really* loudly?"

"...Erm, no. That's not quite what I meant."

"Oh... You know, I've been wondering... With technology that incredible, how come they haven't attacked us already?"

"Yeah, uh... Does any country really have a reason to declare war on the Belgian Empire, though?"

"It doesn't matter whether they have a reason—if you've got that kind of strength, you'll want to test it. It's like how someone in a position of power wants to exercise their authority."

"I see."

Regis couldn't really sympathize with Altina's reasoning, but there was indeed some truth to her words; in his stories, there was no shortage of villains who acted precisely because they had the power to. All of a sudden, he recalled what had been bothering him for some time now.

"...Altina... You have more troops than ever before. If your forces continue to grow, are you thinking about taking on Prince Latrielle?"

Altina paused for a brief moment, deep in thought, her expression unusually serious. "...If I thought it was a battle the people would support, then yes, I would consider it."

"I see."

You sure have grown, Regis thought. Altina had gotten a little more judicious, having learned from her defeat a few days prior. He considered following up by asking what she would do if only half of the people supported the idea, but he decided against it. There was no harm in him thinking it over for her; after all, a ruler didn't need to be omnipotent.

"Hey, then do we not have to do anything?" Altina asked, "Just send our condolences?"

"Hm... Well, it's not like we have unlimited funding."

Preparing for war would mean increasing emergency food stores as well as hiring mercenaries under terms they would usually never agree to in order to temporarily bolster their troops, and both required a considerable sum of money.

Say they used up their budget here. What would they do if, all of a sudden, they received a declaration of war? Without the required funds, they would be in a rather precarious situation, and at times like that the commander was always hard-pressed to make a very tough call.

“Ah, that’s right!” Altina furrowed her brow. “High Britannia is across the western sea, while Fort Volks resides far away on the north-eastern border. What’s more, there’s nothing that seems to suggest we’d be going to war, so there’s no need for us to make any preparations.”

“Yeah. It’d probably amount to nothing.”

But that reasoning was precisely why the north-eastern border would make for an ideal target. The thought did occur to Regis, but he gave it no mind; it would be impossible to reinforce the army in their current situation.

“...Since we’re on the topic of High Britannia...” Altina suddenly spoke up, as though she had just recalled something. “You reckon Bastian’s doing all right? I’m sure he’s healthy as can be, but do you think he’s causing any problems?”

“Third Prince Bastian? He’s studying abroad in High Britannia, isn’t he?”

“Nah. He just didn’t want to be involved in the power struggle so he ran off. I can see him doing something like that; he’s the unhinged type, you see. A weirdo. Or rather—”

“...I did a bit of digging, but... is that really true?”

“You think Latrielle was lying?”

“I can’t say for sure... But Bastian caused all sorts of problems in the imperial court. If we’re not considering Latrielle, I hear he was the least popular member of Belgarian royalty—even less popular than Auguste, who was so sickly he rarely even showed up.”

“Yeah, that sounds about right. He was always causing trouble.”

“I can’t imagine he was even considered as a viable candidate to succeed the throne.”

“Ah, actually, maybe Bastian was sent away to stop him from causing problems. His mother or some other relative always had to apologize on his behalf whenever he worked his mischief, so maybe they finally had enough?”

That said, it would be an even bigger issue if the prince caused trouble in a neighboring country. Though it was probably a bit too late to worry about that; Regis recalled a rumor he had heard.

“...He allegedly got into a fistfight with a brigade of mercenaries at a bar. I have no clue what an underaged prince would be doing in a bar, and the reason why the fight broke out is still unclear.”

What’s more, he had then forced everyone to leave the bar. Whether or not that was true was unclear, but there was no doubting that the prince made no attempts to restrain himself.

Altina nodded. “I think that happened last year? Father ordered him to be placed under house arrest after that.”

“...His Majesty?”

“I remember Bastian saying: ‘The place sounded pretty interesting so I went to check it out, when I saw the waitress was being hassled by drunks. So I stepped in and saved her.’”

“‘Saved?’”

“Yeah. Then he said: ‘All of a sudden, my right hand was throbbing. Turned out I’d started swinging without even realizing it. What can I say? I am the law.’”

“...Not sure how I feel about ‘the law’ being someone who not only went to a bar despite being underage, but then tried to justify it by saying the place ‘sounded pretty interesting.’”

“You make a pretty good point...”

“He has a status to live up to. He can’t go around lashing out just because he thinks he’s in the right; he needs to act in a way that garners support from all sides.”

“Yep, yep. Just because he’s pissed doesn’t mean he should get involved in a bar fight. Bastian really is clueless.”

“...Oh really? I recall a certain someone lunging at the second prince out of anger just a few days ago.”

“Mrk...”

“Considering how impulsive his younger sister is, I’m not too surprised by Bastian’s personality.”

“Grr... I-I’m not as bad as Bastian. I think,” Altina reluctantly tacked on.

“Excuse me, uh...” Eric raised a hand. “In regard to General Latrielle, was there anything else to discuss?”

“What else would there be?” Regis asked.

“Well, we fought the First Army the other day, so I was just wondering... Are we going to be tried for treason? Or are we in the clear?”

“Oh...”

Regis could understand why that was something the soldiers would worry about, but it was an absurd concern as far as he was aware.

“If he wanted to take us to a military tribunal, he’d have to start by proving the legitimacy of the White Wolf Brigade’s actions. Of the two knight brigades that clashed on that day, the tribunal will have to determine which one was in the wrong.”

“That makes sense.”

“He sought to bring Prince Auguste back to the capital; I presume he wanted to invalidate Altina’s support by revealing he was a fake.”

Eric nodded. Altina was listening as well, a meek look on her face.

“Now then,” Regis continued, “what authority did General Latrielle have to issue a forceful summons to Prince Auguste, who had not only relinquished his right to the throne, but is also not in the

Belgarian Army and so has no obligation to obey its commander?"

"Ah." Altina and Eric shared an understanding nod. The White Wolf Brigade's demands far exceeded their authority; it was true that Latrielle was a member of royalty, but when he had ordered the First Army to confront Auguste, he had done so as a general.

"...Although we would have needed to act differently had he ordered Altina to return."

"What would we have done then?"

"Prince Latrielle's order would be considered a summons for a military officer, and, as an officer, you would have naturally needed to bring your troops along as well. That would have given us a reason to return to Fort Volks, where we could make preparations."

"What if he had ordered that I come alone, or said I had to come at once?"

"In a sense, having him pushed that far into a corner would make things easy for us. He may be your superior officer, but ordering a political enemy to come alone would be like announcing to the nation that he was about to assassinate his little sister."

"I see. That's terrible."

"Going back to our siege on Fort Volks, Latrielle would have been frowned upon had you died in battle. He only took such measures because he was certain that, while the army may be expended, there was no risk to its commander. How many nobles would be willing to support a prince who's fallen so far he openly declares an assassination?"

"Are you sure they wouldn't still side against me?"

"The nobles only support Latrielle because they believe he will become emperor. But what emperor would choose a son who has displayed such shameful behavior as his successor?"

"Ah, that's right! Father is really conscious of preserving the image of *L'Empereur Flamme*. It wouldn't be strange for him to cut ties with such a conniving person."

In the end, this power struggle was a popularity contest, the winner being whoever was chosen by the emperor. Latrielle understood that abusing his authority over the military to harm his sister would severely damage his reputation, and essentially remove him from the running. Though, presumably, had Latrielle been born with red hair, he would have already been made emperor—a fact that, when considered, made him almost pitiable. Almost.

Clarisse poured the tea she had brewed, and their breakfast conference came to an end. For once, Regis did not have any decisions to make; no matter how he scrutinized the information on hand, there was but a single option open to him.



A mess of screams and yells echoed across the fortress, and injured soldiers were carted in one after another. Upon hearing the news, Regis raced down the stairs; the plaza just inside the main gate, which was still under repair, had become a battlefield.

Regis eventually reached a medium-sized room that was packed with blood-covered soldiers. Some were resting in beds, but the majority had nowhere to lay but the floor.

“Warm water! Bring as much as you can!” Everard shouted.

Keeping up appearances was the least of the knights’ concerns; they frantically ran to and fro, carrying buckets and vases. Meanwhile Jerome, who was clad in full armor, was crouched down over a young soldier who had fallen in battle, doing his best to administer treatment. He shook his head and slowly rose to his feet, fury in his eyes.

“Bring me a body bag!”

“Eh!? But we haven’t even recited prayers—” The perplexed soldier who had received Jerome’s orders stammered his words before the general thrust him away.

“This soldier’s just died! We’re in a fortress; this is a closed tunnel, not a ventilated plaza. If you don’t want an epidemic, you’ll fetch a body bag and you’ll do it now!”

“Y-Yes, sir!” the soldier cried, running off in search of a body bag.

The strength drained from Regis’s body. His knees buckled, forcing him to lean against the rocky wall to support himself.

“...Ghh.”

“Get a grip!” came a female voice from behind him, “You have to hold on!”

Regis turned around to see Altina encouraging a wounded soldier. The man was bleeding heavily from one shoulder, and the lady doctor was bandaging his wound using white cloth.

It stained red right before his eyes. Cleaning a wound and dressing it—that was often the most that medical technology could offer. From there, recovery came down to how well the person’s body could heal itself naturally, if at all.

A middle-aged knight walked up to Regis, then slapped a hand to his chest in salute. He was the commander of the unit that now faced so many casualties. “Reporting in, Tactician! We were attacked in the northern forest while training!”

“...What sort of attack?”

As Regis looked over the injured, he noticed they were wearing the minimum required protective gear. They must have been the new recruits who had only just arrived at the fortress, many of whom were

still young.

“We sent a scout ahead, but I assume they were killed before they could report back.”

The soldier they had sent out to collect information on the ambushing enemy had never returned, and the attacked unit was full of newcomers who hadn't yet grown accustomed to the land. That explained the damages.

Regis tried to contain the wave of nausea that had washed over him, instead putting his mind to work. “The enemy... Which army did they belong to?”

“We didn't see a flag, but judging by the direction they came from and the weapons they used, I should think they are soldiers of the Grand Duchy of Varden.”

It was an attack by the territory who had formerly owned Fort Volks. Their domain was small, but the natural resources it contained—its abundance of high-quality iron, in particular—meant that Varden had access to considerable wealth; this, in turn, allowed them to gather skilled mercenaries and equip them with high-quality weapons.

Regis may have managed to snatch Fort Volks, but that was only thanks to a scheme; he hadn't done much to weaken the duchy's military strength.

“Those Varden bastards!” exploded Jerome, “Those incorrigible shot-clogs think they can take their fortress back!? Well, have at them! I'm not going to make the same mistake they made, and wait like some kind of pathetic mole in my little hidey hole! Oi, grab me my spear! And you, ready my horse! We're going out at once to cleave open their inadequate skulls. Then we'll see just how much of a brain they're missing!”

Jerome was never one to hide his emotions, but even so, it was rare to see him express this much anger. The soldiers obeyed, as expected, until—

“Wait a second, please!”

“Huh!? Are you telling me to wait!? Oi, Regis! You seriously think you can stop me!?”

“...We received an urgent message from the capital just a moment ago.” Faced with Jerome's rage, it took Regis a moment to gather the courage to speak.

“What do they want now!?” Jerome fearsomely scowled.

“...On the morning of April 23rd, the port city of Ciennbourg was attacked and left in ruin. The Empire's Second Army is engaging the enemy, who has since come ashore.”

It was currently April 30th, so seven days had already gone by since then. Considering that the news had first gone to the capital, where it was discussed by the Ministry of Military Affairs, the message

had reached the border rather swiftly. Regis knew the battle was likely already over, but there was no way he could know the outcome of a battle all the way across the continent.

Jerome groaned. “A port in the west? Don’t tell me *they’re* attacking us now!?”

“...Seems like it. The enemy warship was a steamboat... and on its hull was the crest of High Britannia.”

“What about General Latrielle? Has he said anything?”

“The Ministry of Military Affairs has ordered us to send half of our troops to the western front as reinforcements.”

Unrest spread among the soldiers who were listening in. An enemy of unknown capabilities was invading from the west, and the Grand Duchy of Varden had picked that very moment to launch an attack. What’s more, the supreme commander of the army had requested reinforcements; if Altina dispatched half of her troops to the western front, then those defending against Varden would be at a serious disadvantage. And now that the battle had reached the front gate, it was only natural for some to feel anxious.

Jerome looked at the soldiers, then paused in thought. He was a man who could manipulate his anger to whip the men into a fervor, but, if needed, could just as easily make level-headed decisions.

Altina stood up from beside the wounded man she had been tending to. “Regis, what do you think? Should we focus on sending reinforcements to the west, or on the enemy attacking the fortress?”

“I...”

His mind was blank. He was their tactician, but he didn’t have the intuition to make such a decision on the spot.

Jerome glanced at him. The soldiers were looking his way as well. Any traces of confidence had dissipated, and the thought of speaking his own mind in this situation made his heart stop. His legs were trembling. But right now, he was Altina’s tactician; he couldn’t run away.

Once again, Regis found himself scanning the bookshelves in his head—a place where he stored the knowledge contained in every book he had ever read. He thumbed through countless pages, breezing through as many stories as there were stars in the night sky.

“I can only offer... the teachings of others... Princess.”

On her request, Regis would call the princess “Altina” when only those close to her were around. But if any misunderstandings were to arise among the troops, it would lower their morale, so he made sure to call her “Princess” in public.

“That’s good enough. So, what do you think we should do?”

“...We’re lacking in preparations, information, and time. Even so, I believe we should start by fighting back against the soldiers from

Varden.”

“But what about reinforcing the west?”

“Even if we were to send reinforcements out now, the soldiers would struggle to fight effectively knowing what was happening back at Fort Volks. For this reason, the best approach would be to first deal with the enemy threatening our home base.”

“Makes sense. They’d worry for the ones left behind. And if our fortress was breached, the towns where their families live would be the next targets.”

“Exactly. But it’s also true that we can’t waste too much time on them. Varden might have a drawn-out battle in mind, but... I propose we end things tonight.”

“Tonight!?” Altina’s surprise was understandable. While a fight on the plains could usually be settled relatively quickly, a siege on a fortress would usually span days, if not weeks, no matter the outcome.

The corners of Jerome’s lips curled up to form a ferocious smile. “Kukukuh... So we’re going out, then?”

Regis nodded in response. That was their only option.

The soldiers were astir. Had he really just suggested they purposely leave the fortress that gave them an unshakable advantage!?

Altina balled her fists. “Behind Fort Volks is Theonveil, and many other towns as well. And in the west are more people we must protect... Now is our time to fulfill the pledge of our flag!”

The princess’s flag was a simple one: a shield over a green pasture to symbolize the people. To protect those who made up the Empire—it was for this reason that Altina took up her sword.

Preface 2: Third Prince Bastian

While the Belgarian Empire's territory stretched all the way to the north-western seaboard, across the coast, across the channel, there lay an independent island nation. This island was the Kingdom—or rather, *Queendom*—of High Britannia.

Its environment was harsh; its northern regions were covered in frozen soil, where only potatoes and carrots would grow, and meadows were few and far between. But their abundant iron reserves allowed trade to flourish with various countries across the sea. While holding its own unique traditions in high regard, High Britannia was assertive in bringing in customs and technologies from far-off lands, and managed to precede neighboring regions in successfully implementing both the steam engine and the rifle.

High Britannia, in the eastern capital of Applewood—in a corner of that town, surrounded by trees, stood a school remodeled from an old castle. It was St. Edward's Private Academy, recognized as one of the most prestigious schools across the land and largely attended by the sons and daughters of nobility. It taught pupils from the ages of twelve to sixteen, all of whom were required to live in the on-campus dormitories.

The third prince of the Belgarian Empire, Heinrich Trois Bastian de Belgaria, had enrolled here at the start of that year. Not wanting any special treatment, he had purposefully concealed his identity, now going by the name “Bastian de Madeleine.”

Incidentally, it was not rare for nobles to name their sons after the princes in the hope of sharing some of their good fortune. For this reason, Bastian had become a rather common name for Belgarian nobles ages fifteen and below.

It happened sixteen days before Marie Quatre's army engaged the Grand Duchy of Varden, when the Empire was ablaze with celebration over the day it was founded—

The bell tower rang in St. Edward's Private Academy. The professors dressed as clergy disappeared from the classroom, and Bastian's classmates began to pack away at their own pace. A good portion of them would soon head off to attend after-school club activities.

Bastian wasn't a member of any clubs, and as per usual, planned

to return straight to his dorm. It was then that the Britannian noble boys started to mess with him. The freckled, big-nosed Dick Ayrton swaggered over, his two lackeys trailing closely behind him.

“Hey! Bastian! I hear your country’s out invading again!”

“Huh...? What country might you be referring to?”

“The hell are you on about? I mean Belgaria, no duh!”

“Oh, right.”

Yeah, that one ain’t my country, it’s my old man’s. That was what Bastian wanted to say, but doing so would reveal that he was a prince. His foreign exchange student façade was surprisingly tiresome.

Boss Brat and his tag-alongs would mock him relentlessly whenever rumors spread of something happening in Belgaria. It wasn’t that they had any interest in such matters, they just enjoyed having someone to criticize. Bastian knew the more he took them seriously, the more time would be wasted; he continued to pack away his belongings, wanting to leave as soon as possible.

“I’m not finished talking yet, Galian!” Dick prodded him in the shoulder.

That was what Dick and his lackeys would call the people of Belgaria. The official name, of course, being “Belgarian.” Even if “Garian” were to be accepted as an abbreviation, the purposeful mispronunciation was a slight insult, though not enough for Bastian to actually care.

“Sorry, I might not look it, but I’m pretty busy here.”

“Hm? What’s this? You’re too good to talk to me? Bloody Galian invader!”

“I’m not the one who’s doing the invading, am I?”

“Hmph, it’s still your country!”

Oh, in that case, I’d like to see you shoulder all the sins of High Britannia. But Bastian knew saying that would get him nowhere; this boy had a habit of twisting logic in every which way so that he could proclaim himself the unquestionable voice of reason. What’s more, whenever Bastian tried to leave a conversation, Dick would proudly declare he had won the argument.

“I’ve made my decision to not talk about politics.”

“Hah! You Gilians really are wimps. You lot only care about music and dance. How lamentable, you can’t even manage to discuss something serious.”

“Hey man, I agree, it’s lamentable.”

Bastian had come here to escape the power struggle in the Empire, so the last thing he wanted was to get involved in politics in any way, shape, or form. Not that he had any particular interest in song or dance, either.

The two lackeys chimed in, trying to back Boss Brat up.

“He can’t help it, Dick. You’ve got a father in Parliament; such a cultured individual shouldn’t compare himself to a measly Galian. You’re cut from a completely different cloth.”

“Yeah, that’s right, Dick! We’ve entered the era of guns, and yet they say the Galianes still fight using lances.”

Dick snorted. “Good grief, talk about being behind the times. But that’s what happens when a nation neglects politics.”

“Hya hya hya!” they chortled.

No matter the country, those scornful voices were always the same. Bastian clenched his fist, then touched the thin, silver ring around his right middle finger. It represented a promise he had made to his grandfather.

“One fight, and you’re coming right back home.”

Back in Belgaria, the elderly emperor, Liam Fernandi de Belgaria, had made it seem as though he was finally ready to abdicate the throne; this only intensified the already ruthless struggle for power.

The most likely successor is probably Second Prince Latrielle. At least, that was how Bastian saw it. Latrielle’s only real rival, First Prince Auguste, was sickly and confined to his villa. When Bastian had visited to say his goodbyes before leaving for High Britannia, they had exchanged but a few words while the first prince lay in his bed.

Chances are he’s going to croak before the emperor...

Bastian was not the only one who failed to predict what would really come to pass. While the country celebrated the anniversary of its founding, a certain tactician dragged Latrielle’s name through the mud, had Auguste renounce his right to the throne, and threw the prince’s younger sister, Princess Argentina, into the running. But whatever the case, Bastian was keen on staying far away from these factional disputes. That kind of authority didn’t appeal to him in the slightest.

Shoulder the lives of millions? You’ve got to be kidding me.

And so, he chose to run away. Upon hearing his wishes, his grandfather on his mother’s side supported him studying abroad. Surely, no matter how low the possibility that Bastian would actually take the throne, the man would have wanted to raise him as a candidate to be emperor. But his dear grandfather had surrendered those desires to support Bastian’s wishes. Bastian could remember his words clearly.

“Say again? You want to leave the country!? Well, thank God for that! Ah, no, I mean— What a shame that is! But, if you’re going to cause trouble, it might as well be in another... Oh, I see, I see. I was sure you had it in you to become emperor, but if you so insist... While it pains my heart, I shall honor your wishes!”

There were some questionable parts here and there, but that

didn't change the fact he had let him study abroad. That was why Bastian had to honor his promise.

"...Don't fight... Don't reveal your identity... And don't butt into foreign politics and religion..." he muttered under his breath.

"Oi! What are you whispering about, creep!?"

"Oh, nothing. Just a magic spell."

"Really? Hey, what's that?"

Dick snatched a rather plain-looking book from the pile of items Bastian was putting away. It had a black cover and gold hemming, and there was no title or author written on it. For a moment, Bastian felt as though he was going to snap. He frantically placed his left hand over his right, trying to contain himself.

"Whoa there... G-Give it back, will you?"

But Bastian's request fell on deaf ears. Dick grinned, looking as though he had just found a new, interesting toy.

"Hah! Now *this* is suspicious! You reckon it's full of Galian secrets? Looks like some investigation is in order."

"Wait, that— That's just a journal."

"That so? Then you shouldn't mind me opening it up and seeing for myself."

Bastian grit his teeth. *How tasteless can you be?*

He could feel his right fist inching forward, when the slender ring on his middle finger caught his eye. He had made a promise. He needed to calm down. He needed to make level-headed decisions.

"...If I bury them ten feet under, what evidence would there be that I ever got into a fight?"

Should I...? Yeah, let's do it!

"Hya hya hya!" Dick let out another unseemly laugh, and was just about to open the book when—

"Oh, quit it, you simpletons!"

A clear female voice caught everyone's attention like a harsh slap to the face. Her tone came across as harsh, but not rude. Then, a small hand reached in from the side and liberated the black book from the villain's hands moments before it could be opened.

Dick and his cohorts froze for a second, completely dumbfounded, then bared their fangs.

"The hell do you think you're doing, Archibald!?"

"That should be my line, you fool among fools who surrounds himself with just as foolish fools. Forcefully plundering someone's possessions shows a lack of grace, decency, and above all, humanity. Your actions are those of a senseless beast. Aren't you ashamed to be alive?"

The girl who was now rambling on and on was one of Bastian's classmates. She was sixteen years old, the same age as Bastian, and

her name was Elize Archibald. Her blond hair grew down to her knees, and she had facial features that would make her look quite endearing—well, if she ever smiled, that was. She had stern inner workings that shamelessly made their way to the surface, as evident through her ever-furrowed eyebrows and the cold look in her eyes, which had led to her being teased as a loose cannon—someone who was always prone to explode.

She was upstanding in character, accomplished in both literary and military arts, and attractive enough to warrant a second glance. The only thing about her that could be described as “lacking” was her chest. Indeed, Elize’s bosom was so nonexistent that, at first glance, one might assume she was wearing some strange variation of the boys’ uniform. The only real giveaway was the standard-issue ribbon on the front—a desperate plea to assert her gender.

“Well? Can any of you honestly say that your continued existence is of any benefit to the world at large?”

Dick was taken aback. “Urk... Did you really have to go that far!?”

“You’ve done so much that, yes, I really had to go that far. You still can’t comprehend that? Good grief, there really is no salvation for foolishness. And to think, you don’t even realize the simple fact that you’re a fool.”

“Look, Archibald—my dad’s a member of Parliament, you know! Don’t forget we’re a marquis house.”

“Your father may be a splendid politician, but he is evidently completely incompetent as an educator. To think he’s failed to instill in his son even the most basic form of common decency over the course of sixteen years.”

“S-Say that again!”

“If you don’t want to hear it, then you should work your hardest not to soil your family name. Please, refrain from doing anything embarrassing.”

“Kuh... You... You wench!”

Dick raised his fist. While Bastian had been frozen in place by Elize’s vigorous verbal assault, he reflexively clenched his hand as well. The ring on his middle finger let off a grating sound.

Elize didn’t falter. “What are you doing now? Do you really want the word ‘suspended’ or ‘expelled’ to be carved into your otherwise wholly unremarkable school record? There really is no end to your foolishness. I will not stop you, intentionally so. If an expulsion will leave you huddled in a room at daddy’s house, clutching your knees to your head, muttering to yourself until you finally realize that the world does not revolve around you, I will gladly allow my face to be bent a little out of shape.”

“...Not on my watch,” muttered Bastian. Had Dick really thrown a

punch, Bastian would have sent him swimming through the air until he eventually had a face-first encounter with a wall. But, as luck would have it, one of the tag-alongs tugged on Boss Brat's sleeve.

"Hey, Dick, let's just go. Leave the Galian and the loose cannon behind. We'll have loads more fun fishing or something."

"Y-Yeah... Tsk... Consider yourselves lucky; I'll let you off today!"

"How broad-minded of you," complimented one lackey.

"You're way too important for this," added the other.

And with that, Boss Brat left the classroom, his two underlings in tow.



Bastian exited the school building and began walking down the path that led to the dorms, which was dotted by other students who were heading to the same destination. To either side of the path stood the remains of old brick walls, crumbled by the ravages of war. Apparently, a civil war had been fought here a hundred years ago.

Walking beside Bastian was Elize, the girl who had confronted Dick.

"You really saved me back there, Elize."

"Oh, it was nothing."

The book she had rescued for Bastian was now firmly in his right hand.

"My future masterpiece was quite nearly condemned to darkness by those idiots."

"So it really isn't a journal."

"Why would I ever keep a journal? This is the story I'm writing!"

He opened the book and waved it about. It was filled with line upon line of handwritten prose.

"Your handwriting is appalling."

"Wha—!? Who cares about that! It'll be in typeface when it's eventually published."

Printing had developed to a point where it used countless typeface blocks made of metal. Each one had a particular raised, mirrored letter on its surface. These blocks would be lined up on a board in accordance with the manuscript, coated in ink, then pressed against paper. They were essentially rearrangeable ink stamps, also known as movable-type printing.

"Then you should hope the technicians at the print shop are also skilled cryptographers. Also, you somehow misspelled 'stupid' here. It's spelled S-T-U-P-I-D, not S-T-U-P-E-D. Is it written like that because the speaker is supposed to be stupid? Did you do it on purpose?"

"O-Of course it was on purpose!"

"Darkness, death, evil, night'... Is there a particular reason it

starts out with a literal list of dark words?”

“Why of course! The greatest masterpiece needs the coolest beginning. Though I don’t expect an amateur to comprehend the sheer badassery of what I’ve done here.”

“...If you’re going to pretend this is literature, you should at least avoid pointlessly repeating the same word in consecutive sentences. It looks unprofessional.”

“Eh? Are you being serious!?”

Bastian hadn’t even been aware that was a rule. He looked back at his own work, this time closely scrutinizing it.

“But you would do well to finish it regardless. Whether it’s a masterpiece or an abject failure, it can’t be called a story unless it’s completed,” she said, just as Bastian was starting to think he should start over from scratch.

“Y-Yeah... Got it. I’ll finish the story. Hey, could you... read it when I’m done?”

“Are you sure you want me to? I’m not good at sugarcoating things.”

“No, just give it to me straight. I’d prefer it that way.”

“I see. Quite the masochist, aren’t you? I understand.”

Elize silently moved away a few paces to distance herself from Bastian, prompting him to wildly shake his head.

“Wrong! Totally wrong, I tell ya! ...I-I mean, yeah... It’s harsh to hear you tear apart the story I wrote and all... but I’m the man who’s going to write the greatest work in the whole world. I’m sure I’ll be able to make it even better with your input.”

“Weirdo.”

“Hah... Look who’s talking.”

Elize was surely a weirdo too. As an exchange student from Belgaria, Bastian was having a hard time fitting in, but this girl was one person he could speak to on equal terms.

“Hm... Understood. I’m sure doing so will bring me a considerable amount of pain, but now that I’ve told you to finish your story, I must take responsibility; I shall read it to the very end.”

“Great, that’s a promise!”

“I swear it. Even if it rots my eyes out.”

“It ain’t that terrible! It’ll make you cry though, I guarantee it! For I’m the man who’ll one day write the greatest book in history.”

“You sure dream big.”

“Fufufu... It’ll be my masterpiece! My book’ll be stocked in every library in the world. It’ll be so well known that people will just automatically assume everyone has read it.”

“The only books with a reputation like that are the holy texts.”

“Then surpassing the Bible will be my first objective.”

“That’s step *one*...?”

Elize looked over at Bastian, her eyes fixed on him. Was there something on his face? He tried rubbing his cheek.

All of a sudden, Elize swallowed her breath.

“Oh my God! Bastian!”

“What, have you finally realized the magnificence of my masterpiece?”

“Don’t be foolish! Bull, coming this way!”

“Mn?”

From time to time, runaway bulls from the surrounding farms would make their way onto the academy grounds. That must have been what was happening now; there was no other explanation for the massive black and red bull that was barreling down the brick wall-enclosed path, kicking up a cloud of smoke as it charged forward. A cattle handler was giving chase, but it didn’t look like he would be catching it any time soon.

The students on their way to the dorm cried out as they scampered over the walls.

“Let’s get out of here, Bastian!”

“Ah, but... the cattle handler looks like he’s in a pickle. Not to mention, you’re too short to make it over the wall. Stand back a bit.”

“What are you talking about!? Do you want to be impaled!?”

“Meh. A bull that size is easy enough.”

“A-Are you a fool!?”

“Just leave it to me.”



The mass of black and red came closer and closer, obscuring the scenery behind in a cloud of sand.

“...Actually, looking at it up close... it’s a lot bigger than I thought.”

“You are a genuine fool!”

“What are you saying? I’m the man who’ll write the best book in the world!”

In an attempt to knock down the human obstacle standing in its path, the bull picked up speed and ran straight at Bastian, its sharp horns encroaching on his chest.

And... now!

Bastian grabbed a horn in each hand. Under normal circumstances, a human trying to match the overwhelming strength of a bull would be torn through like a scrap of paper. His feet carved out the ground beneath him; so too did the hooves of the great bovine. Even on the off chance that their strength was evenly matched, two leather boots didn’t stand a chance against four iron hooves—or at least, they shouldn’t have.

“Settle down and go home! You’ve got all the grass you can eat back there, what else do you need!?”

Bastian clenched his hands hard, raising an uncanny grating sound. The bull let out an anguished cry as Bastian forced its horns down.

“Hrrah!”

The bull’s forehooves gave out, followed by a tremendous rumble.

“...No way,” muttered Elize, her face ghastly pale from the spectacle.

The bovine’s chin had been slammed onto the ground, forcing it to prostrate itself like a tamed dog. A bull several times stronger than a human had been taken down using brute force.

“Eeesh... I cut that way too close. My palms are aching.”

“Wait... Bastian, are you hurt anywhere!?”

“Nah. The fingers that will write the greatest book in history are all fine, don’t you worry.”

“...I’m shocked. I saw it with my own eyes and yet even I can’t bring myself to believe it.”

“It was that impressive? Wow, you’re making me blush.”

“You really are incorrigible.”

The handler raced over and offered an earnest apology. “Sorry about that, sir! Real sorry! You two all right!?”

Elize nodded. “We’re fine.”

“Thank the Lord! I’d be in real hot water if one of you noble lads or lasses ended up injured. My bull got stung by a bee, ya see; stirred

him right up. Guess we're real lucky he decided to stop, else he coulda hit someone."

"I suppose that is the most rational assumption to make," Elize sighed. The students who were watching from nearby also seemed to believe that the bull had stopped of its own accord, and as Bastian made no effort to correct them, this was very quickly accepted as the truth.

The cattle handler tugged at the rope attached to the sullen black and red bull, leading it back down the path. Bastian watched them for a moment, when he suddenly realized—

"Aah!?"

It must have happened during their tussle; there was now a firm, hoof-shaped imprint on the cover of Bastian's black book. He looked like he was going to cry.

"Waah... My future masterpiece..."

"U-Um, Bastian?"

"Yeah? If you're going to ask for my autograph then sorry, my signature's still a work in progress!"

"...Hah... Forget it."

"What were you gonna say?"

"Just that you're more foolish than even the most foolish fools."

"Did you seriously have to repeat it three times!? Don't you think I've suffered enough today? First I was picked on in the classroom, then a cow trampled on my book, and now you're saying I'm a triple fool..."

"I suppose that's enough then... Fufu."

Elize glanced at the boy walking beside her, a rose tint coloring her cheeks.

The next morning, Elize Archibald vanished from St. Edward's Private Academy without so much as a goodbye.

Preface 3: The Black Princess and Her White Knight

“Off with his head.”

The palace of Queenstower in High Britannia was a breathtaking structure, from which rose countless towers. In one of these towers, Princess Margaret Stillart had taken up residence. She sat on a luxurious red sofa, clad in a luxurious silk dress. As a seventeen-year-old woman soon to be eighteen, Margaret had only just reached the age of adulthood in High Britannia, but she was already a rather splendid woman; her flowing black hair that reached down to her hips was currently being tended to by half-naked maids, while another applied a transparent oil to her pale, slender feet. The maids wore only strips of cloth around their chests as they tended to Margaret's hair and skin.



They were in a circular, white-walled room, the inner perimeter of which was lined with white pillars and small windows. The flag of High Britannia hung from the ceiling, accompanied by numerous black and red cloths, while the flame of a gas lamp painted wavering shadows on the walls.

About three paces from the sofa where Margaret was seated was a man dressed in military attire, holding a report in one hand.

“The death penalty? Are you certain of this?”

The man’s already narrow eyes narrowed even further. He was tall—perhaps even somewhat gangly—and wore the white ceremonial uniform of a knight. His appearance was rather pleasing to the eye; his hair was a pale, grayish blue, and his eyes a similar color.

He was Oswald Coulthard, close retainer to Princess Margaret. High Britannia did not have a tradition of nobles having their own armies, so legally speaking their bond was merely that of a princess and her guard. Nonetheless, with Margaret’s backing, Oswald had risen to the rank of colonel at the young age of twenty. As he had been born the third son of a merchant, this was an exceptional accomplishment.

Margaret glared at him, her amber eyes as sharp as knives. “Oh dear, does that displease you?”

“Displease me...? Perish the thought. I would never show such insolence before the wise Princess Margaret.”

“Then why haven’t you given the order yet? How very curious.”

“Would this order be in regard to the servant who was caught stealing bread?”

“That’s right. And I say off with his head.”

“Very well, then it shall be as you command. Of course, I cannot allow something so unsightly to dirty the radiant Princess Margaret’s gemstone eyes; this petty thief shall never appear before you again, and his name shall never sully your ears.”

“My oh my... When you say that, what you really mean... fufufu... is that you’ll let him get away.”

“I would not dream of doing such a thing.”

“Fufufu... A princess who has someone put to death over something as petty as stealing bread must be a demon. Such notoriety would no doubt spread. I can’t wait to hear what abuse they shall hurl at me.”

Margaret gave a cheerful giggle. She had the laugh of an innocent young woman.

“I am but a petty officer who lives to serve Her Highness,” Oswald said, his expression unchanging, “After all you have done for someone as undeserving as myself, the life of a mere bread thief and the scorn

of rabble are not even worth consideration compared to the noble Princess Margaret's honorable will."

"I should think so."

"The reason this petty officer did not issue the order at once is simply because I earnestly did not wish for any other man to be blessed by the sight of the princess's beautiful legs. I understand that they are your retainers, but I did not wish to share this sight with anyone else."

"Dear me, you really are so possessive."

"I am sure that any other man would do the same when standing before the most valuable treasure in the world. I feel no shame in my actions."

"Fufufu... You always have had quite the silver tongue."

"I speak frankly and from the heart."

The maid who had been oiling Margaret's feet had now worked her way up to the princess's knees. Margaret pinched the hem of her silk dress and playfully hitched it up, spreading her legs enough that the skin underneath her skirt could very nearly be seen.

"I don't care anymore; I've grown sick of the matter. Forget about the servant and tell me about something more interesting."

"Certainly." Oswald did not falter in the slightest.

At that moment, someone called "Messenger!" from beyond the crème-colored door. Margaret glanced toward it. Oswald took this as a show of permission, and called back.

"You may enter at ease." It appeared his polite manner of speaking did not change no matter who he was talking to.

"Pardon me!"

In came a figure wearing the uniform of High Britannia's Royal Army, who immediately touched the fingers of her right hand to her temple in salute. There was a longsword hanging from her left hip, two daggers fastened to her thigh, and a rifle slung over her shoulder, the ammunition for which could be seen in her breast pouch. Despite being in the palace, this woman was dressed for the battlefield. She had short black hair, sharp eyes, and tightly pursed lips.

Her name was Glenda. She was a first lieutenant who acted as Oswald's adjutant, despite being just eighteen years of age.

"It's from our mouse!" Glenda exclaimed.

She wasn't referring to the animal, but rather the spy that Oswald had sent out previously. This was a verbal message—one that was to be kept off the record. It would be *that* sort of message.

Oswald saluted to Margaret before lending an ear to Glenda. The first lieutenant had to stand on tiptoes before her lips could reach his ear.

"....."

“Understood.”

When she had given her report, Glenda saluted again and exited the room without another word.

“What a boring girl,” Margaret said with a sigh, “At the very least put on some lipstick. She was born a noble and a woman, was she not?”

Glenda was indeed the lady of a viscount house.

High Britannia had its fair share of women in the military, which wasn’t particularly surprising given that its ruling monarch was female. But even then, they were rarely, if ever, the ones standing on the front lines.

Oswald made sure to see the female officer off, making no mention of her makeup—or rather, her lack thereof—before returning to Margaret.

“The report concerns the movements of Her Majesty The Queen,” he said.

Oswald had snuck a spy into the palace to keep a close watch on the queen of High Britannia, known in full as Queen Charlotte Stillart. For generations now, the right to rule had been held exclusively by women. This was for several reasons: there was never any risk of a child being born outside of the royal bloodline, they would never have to fight—and thus would never die—in war, and they tended to have longer lifespans. It could be said that they had established a more stable reign than the surrounding countries that were ruled by men.

Not only had Queen Charlotte reached fifty years of age, but she had grown increasingly sickly in recent years; it was about time for her to name her successor. Her husband had died young during an epidemic, leaving no children behind.

Should the proper order of succession be followed, her younger brother’s daughter, Margaret Stillart, would be chosen—the very same princess lounging on the sofa having oil smeared over her legs. If she was indeed chosen, Oswald’s status would automatically rise as well.

But Oswald had his concerns. Margaret’s father was a war hawk who proudly hoisted up his theory that the nation must use the technological advantage it had gained to expand its territory. This way of thinking had spread through Parliament, the army, and the people, so much so that it wouldn’t be unreasonable to assume it had become the majority opinion.

In opposition to this, there were those who asserted that the country was flourishing economically and that there was no need to break the peace, though this was very much the minority view.

But as someone who was vehemently against war, Queen Charlotte shared this notion. Opposing the majority was arduous to say the least, so there was a chance she would choose a successor who

passionately shared her ideology. In fact, that possibility was precisely why Oswald had stationed a spy in the palace.

Margaret spoke out disinterestedly. She had deliberately hitched her dress up even higher, but elicited no reaction.

“Did something happen to my aunt?”

The maid who had been rubbing oil onto the princess’s legs had now worked her way to her exposed inner thigh. Margaret let out a long sigh, her lips curling into an alluring smile.

Oswald stared straight into the princess’s amber eyes, his gaze unwavering.

“The six knights of the royal guard have been convened by Her Majesty.”

“Hm.”

Margaret offered a rather laid-back reply, but on the inside she was likely much less composed. The report continued.

“The queen summoned them to her bedroom. Only the head butler was in attendance. She presumably passed on the name of her successor.”

“Oh dear, this is troublesome. Do you think I should expect to receive a summons from Aunt?”

“Had your name been put forward, I imagine we would have heard from the messenger by now.”

Queen Charlotte and Princess Margaret both lived in Queenstower, albeit in separate towers, and it took less than half an hour to run a lap around the palace.

“You’re right. How peculiar... If she did indeed name her successor, why has no messenger come for me?” Margaret emphasized, though she clearly knew the answer.

Naturally, she had not been chosen.

Margaret no doubt understood the severity of her situation, but treated it as a joke nonetheless. It was surely an issue that would seal her future in darkness, but to this girl it just appeared to be another form of entertainment.

Was she really that eccentric, or was this perhaps just the standard temperament of a royal? Whatever the case, it was certain that Margaret wasn’t entirely sane.

“This is merely the conjecture of a petty officer,” Oswald continued, “but... I believe the royal guard has set off for the eastern capital of Applewood.”

“I should think so. That is where Liz is, after all.”

The girl that Margaret called “Liz” was her cousin, Princess Elizabeth Victoria. She was the daughter of the queen’s younger sister and, at sixteen years of age, was something of a little sister to Margaret.

Elizabeth was too young to take the throne, and her pedigree was iffy at best, but she was very similar to Charlotte—a brave, stout-hearted pacifist with a strong sense of justice.

“Princess Elizabeth is scheduled to continue her studies until July. I presume Her Majesty intended to wait until she graduated. However, given her poor health and the state of the country, it is appropriate to think she has hastened her decision.”

“Dear me... Is Auntie really doing that poorly? How worrisome.”

“How considerate. Had Her Majesty heard your words of concern, I am sure she would be overjoyed.”

“Fufufu... Well then... Shall I begin thinking of how to congratulate Liz when she is crowned queen?”

“There is no need.”

“Oh, a pity. I was just thinking that pink roses would complement her beautifully.”

“If you say so, that is most definitely right. But I believe pink is far too vibrant of a color for a funeral.”

“You’re right. I’ll have to choose something more appropriate.”

“As a petty officer, it pains my heart enough to split my chest to make such a request, but... Princess Margaret... could you afford me some time?”

“Fufufu... As long as you don’t bore me, Oswald.”

“Of course.”

Oswald had considered the possibility that Queen Charlotte would not name Princess Margaret as her successor, and as this was a situation he had already anticipated, he had already given the order.

By now, Glenda should have departed from the palace, and a unit in Margaret’s faction was already stationed in a fort near Applewood. The six knights of the royal guard would never make it back to the palace in one piece. Of course, neither would Princess Elizabeth.

Oswald changed the topic, instead speaking about a play that was popular in town. As he rambled on and on, he worked through a few plans in his head.

He would get Margaret enthroned—that much was a given. In fact, it was simply the first step of a much wider plan. He had so much more to do. The map in his head spread out to Belgaria, and the countries beyond.

Chapter 1: Princess Elizabeth

The visitors arrived through the mist early that morning, knocking on the door to the girls' dormitory. While St. Edward's Private Academy was surrounded by brick walls, there were many portions of said wall that were left destroyed from an old war. The unsavory sort did enter from time to time, though it was doubtful a bandit would knock on the front door...

The dormitory's dorm mother was a woman who had considerable military experience. She opened the door in her pajamas, the longsword of her forefathers ready in one hand.

Six knights were standing outside the door. Under normal circumstances they would be wearing bright red mantles, but right now they were dressed in black overcoats.

"Sorry for troubling you so early in the morning. We are the personal guards of Queen Charlotte."

"What...!?"

Just seeing how burly and polite these men were was enough to convince her they were the real deal. Of course, they also wore pendants displaying the royal crest to prove this, but their courteous tone and the sincere look in their eyes left no room for doubt.

"We believe there is an Elize Archibald in this dormitory," said the knight at the lead.

"Th-There is."

The dorm mother knew Elize's real identity. In fact, she was the only person in the dorm who did—beside Elize herself, of course. She could infer that the fated day had finally come, even though the girl was still just a student.

"You are aware of the circumstances?" the knight asked.

"I am."

"Then that makes matters easier. Please guide us to her room... The room of Princess Elizabeth Victoria."

Elizabeth, who had deliberately decided to go by "Elize" in the academy, received a knock at her door. She had already finished her usual morning preparations and cautiously peeked her head into the hall to see six knights fall to their knees in reverence.

Other students popped their heads out to see what was going on, but quickly receded when they received a stern glare from their dorm

mother. Regardless, they were at a curious age, and the everyday life of a student tended to be lacking in excitement. And so a few continued peeping through the gaps in their doors regardless.

It would be impossible to conduct what was happening in secret, and so the knights did not seem to be bothered by their spectators.

“Princess Elizabeth, we offer our deepest apologies for the sudden visit. Please spare us some mercy, for this is an emergency.”

“...Has something happened to the queen?”

“In regard to Her Majesty, her condition has taken an unfortunate turn. The physician has concluded that she does not have much time.”

“...Oh.”

“That is why Her Majesty entrusted us with this, asking that we pass it on to you.”

The lead knight held out an indigo-colored jewelry box. Elize ran her fingers along its intricately designed sides, feeling out each detail as she opened its lid with her other hand.

Inside was the Rose Ring—a ring engraved with the royal seal, signifying the ruler of High Britannia. It was made of gold, and its head was modeled after a rose.

“You’re asking me... to become queen...?”

“Such is Queen Charlotte’s will.”

The knights were as still as statues, awaiting her decision. For a brief moment, Elizabeth hesitated. Should she accept this, she would never be able to return to her normal life. She could never go to school again. From this very moment onward, she would shoulder the nation. In exchange for great power and authority, she would lose so much as a human being.

“...I know the responsibility that comes with my position... I’m not going to run away.”

She took the ring and slid it onto her left ring finger. It was a little too big for her, and would surely fall off if she didn’t take care to hold on to it.

“It’s a little big for my hands.”

“The official coronation will take place once we have Parliament’s approval. However, as per ancient custom, from this very moment, Lady Elizabeth, you are the queen of High Britannia.”

She was not yet queen by modern law, but the oldest laws of the land recognized her as having taken the throne. As knights placed heavy respect on tradition, they already saw it appropriate to treat her as their queen; they removed their swords from their belts, scabbard and all, and placed them on the floor.

“This is no palace, there is no one to bear witness, and we can only offer such a simple ceremony, but... we knights of the royal guard swear our everlasting loyalty to Queen Elizabeth.”

The girl nodded. "Thank you. I shall count on you to defend both myself and this country."

"Even should it cost us our lives!"

The knights locked hands and lowered their heads to the floor. Then they immediately re-equipped their swords, wearing grim expressions as they stood up.

"Getting right to business, Lady Elizabeth—you must head to the palace at once."

"To meet with Her Majesty?"

"...That may be wishful thinking."

Elizabeth could infer from the knights' expressions that she should prepare for the worst. By the laws of High Britannia, after the death of the queen, the country would mourn for one whole week. This period was known as the "Seven Days of Silence." Once the mourning concluded, Parliament would recognize the designated successor and announce her as the new queen. This was known as the "Daybreak Declaration."

"So we must return before the week of mourning is up... Is that what you're telling me? Is the situation really that dire?"

The knights kept their silence. It seemed they really were working against time.

Elizabeth glanced back into her room, looking one last time at the study desk she was so familiar with, her uniform that was hung up on the wall, her well-worn student bag... Then, the face of a certain boy crossed her mind. She stood in silence for a moment before shaking her head; from this point forward, they were all no more than fond memories.

"...We must leave at once, correct?"

"Correct. It should be safe to say that the sirs and madams of Princess Margaret's faction are not looking forward to your arrival."

"No doubt they intend to trample over Her Majesty's noble will!" another knight from near the back snapped. Those around did remonstrate him for the sudden outburst, but it was clear that even he was speaking lightly.

Elizabeth nodded. "So you're saying I may be assassinated."

"Not on our watch. We've already taken precautions. Knights dressed as us are headed here from the palace by carriage. The mountains in the way make it a five-day trip by carriage, but... we used the steam train to reach Applewood in a day."

"You used the steam train?" That was a surprise. The royal guard were the ones responsible for holding ceremonies; they valued appearances to an astounding degree.

The lead knight laughed, then gave Elizabeth a proud grin. "I'm sure that Princess Margaret's faction would not expect it either. No

doubt we're one step ahead. From the station, we traveled here on the fastest horses. There is a carriage prepared for you outside. It may not be appropriate for a queen, but—"

"I have not yet received Parliament's approval. A borrowed carriage is more than enough."

"My gratitude. While Princess Margaret's troops are chasing the royal carriage, we should be able to return to the royal capital by train."

By custom, a new queen was to arrive in the royal carriage. But this was no time to be a stickler for tradition.

Elizabeth walked over to the closet at the back of her room and reached inside.

"I'll be ready at once. I won't keep you waiting."

The six knights lowered their heads in unison, and in no time at all, the girl who had been known as "Elize" was headed for Applewood Station as Princess Elizabeth, in a carriage surrounded by guards.

She could hear the schoolhouse bell chiming behind her.



The tower bell rang. Across the brick wall-lined paths, crowds of students entered the school building.

Bastian stifled a yawn as he stepped into the classroom, then glanced over at Elize's desk. As unusual as it was, she was nowhere to be seen. She wasn't involved in any before-school club activities, but would always arrive at school considerably early regardless so that she could do some studying or tidying up.

"Mn... And I spent the whole night writing, as well..."

Bastian slapped his bag. Bound in leather was his greatest masterpiece—something he had spent an entire sleepless night working on. Try as he might, the hoof-print just wouldn't go away.

"Fufufu... Shouldn't be long now... Read and tremble at emotions you never even knew you had!"

His monologue must have been too loud, as the students around him were now eying him rather dubiously. But this was inconsequential compared to the fact that Elize hadn't shown up yet. Another anxious moment passed, and she still wasn't there.

He noticed the girls seated by Elize's desk gossiping among themselves. They were getting quite into it. While Bastian did not have many friends in class, he was generally terrible at showing reservation, or waiting for the right opportunity, or being passive and the like. The moment something came to mind, he would immediately act on it.

He called out to the whispering group. "Hey, you got a minute?"

“Yeah, sure. What’s up?” one girl answered.

This foreign country was wonderful. Whenever he tried to strike up a conversation with noble girls back in the Belgian courts, they would all either turn pale in the face and cower or their retainers would jump into the fray, staking their lives on extracting them from the situation. For some peculiar reason, Bastian was feared by the nobles. But in this school, he could just talk to people normally.

“Has Elize caught a cold or something?”

“Err...”

The girls exchanged looks. Whatever it was that was on their minds was clearly hard to say.

“What’s going on? You trying to keep secrets from me?”

“N-Not exactly...” One of the girls’ faces was beginning to look nervous.

Oops, my bad... He intended to make it as an earnest, kind, and friendly young man in this school.

“Ah, sorry. It’s okay. There’s nothing to be worried about. Won’t you please tell me?”

“Y-You see... Lady Elize was...”

“She’s a lady now?”

“That’s right. Lady Elize... Who would have thought she was actually Princess Elizabeth Victoria!?”

Kaboom! The girl’s declaration was so sudden that Bastian could have sworn he heard the explosion as the bombshell dropped. Others had clearly overheard, as voices of surprise and wonder filled the room.

“Hm...” Bastian gave a small nod. “She was? You learn something new every day. So, yeah, is she off with a cold or something?”

“You’re not surprised!? Ah, did you already know!? You two were pretty close.”

“No, this is the first I’m hearing of it...”

Those who had been looking at him dubiously were now staring in complete disbelief.

Crap. Guess you’re supposed to act surprised when you hear your classmate’s a princess of High Britannia!

“Whoa! H-How totally surprising!”

“...So from the point of view of a Belgian, High Britannian royalty is nothing special, hm? I see.”

Not only were the girls now staring at him coldly, the rest of the class was too. *Talk about harsh...*

“T-That’s not what I meant.”

Bastian hadn’t meant to come across like he was insulting the country; he had just ended up thinking “Oh, hey, so she’s like me.” His feelings of kinship had won out over his surprise.

“Well, you are a Belgian noble. I suppose I can’t blame you... So anyway, Lady Elizabeth isn’t absent because of something as trivial as a cold.”

“Then why isn’t she here today?”

“The knights came for her, and she’s headed to the castle. I’m certain she’ll most probably become our new queen, for sure!” The girl was so excited that her last sentence came out rather muddled.

The classroom was astir again, both honored to have one of their classmates become queen and anxious over how lightly they had treated her before. Dick and his lackeys in particular were looking rather pale. They had clashed with the princess a few times over Bastian, so it stood to reason.

“Mn? Hold on a tick... Then you’re telling me she’s not gonna be here for the whole day!?”

“What are you talking about!? She’s not a commoner anymore! She’s not even a noble! The queen of High Britannia doesn’t even leave the castle unless something drastic happens.”

“Eeh!? Then... if I want to see that gal...”

“Mind your manners. You must refer to her as Princess Elizabeth or Her Highness.”

“For real...? If she becomes queen...”

“She already belongs to a world distant from our own.”

“I’ll only ever be able to see her in diplomatic meetings... Hell no, I don’t wanna become a diplomat!”

“Err, diplomat? Of Belgaria!? Don’t tell me your house is actually some distinguished family. If I’m remembering right, aren’t you from a house of counts?”

While counts were on the higher end when it came to status, they weren’t quite important enough to act as representatives of a country. That was precisely why Bastian had decided to say he was from a house of counts when making his false identity.

Having been reminded of this by the girl, Bastian finally regained his composure.

“Ah... No... You’re right. We’re definitely counts. Yes, of course we are.”

“I’m not going to sugarcoat it—it’ll be near impossible for a Belgian count to seek an audience with the queen.”

“You’re... right.”

As Bastian was in actual fact not a count, but Belgaria’s third prince, his royal standing might afford him an opportunity. But if he came as a diplomat, could he just hand over the story he had written along with letters and treaties from the emperor? Definitely not.

“...Hey, what you said a minute ago... About probably being certain she’ll surely become something or other...”

“Yeah?”

“That means she’s not actually queen yet, right!”

Bastian closed in as he spoke, causing the girl he was talking with to fearfully step back.

“Th-That’s right. In High Britannia, we have the Daybreak Declaration first. Only then is the new queen crowned.”

Now that he thought about it, Bastian was sure he had heard that before. The death of the current queen would be followed by the Seven Days of Silence, but it seemed the girl had deliberately not mentioned that. Even Bastian had enough prudence to avoid the subject.

“Yeah, so she’s not queen yet, right? Right! So if I want to give it to her, now’s my last chance!”

“G-Give her what?”

“I have to meet her before she becomes queen, no matter what.”

“You mean... you have feelings you need to get across?”

“Mn? Sure, I guess you could put it like that.”

After all, every story ever written expressed the feelings of its author in one way or another. In Bastian’s case, this feeling was “Isn’t this so freaking cool!?” and other similar emotions.

The girl’s cheeks reddened. “My, so it’s a love that transcends status! Borders, even!”

“Eh? That’s not what it’s about at all.”

Bastian had written about something else entirely. As the character in his story very aptly summarized: “Magic powers reside in my right hand, and I use those powers to beat the ever-loving crap out of demons from hell.” It didn’t even come close to a love story...

But the girl simply shook her head. Her eyes had gone so dreamy it was like they were giving off sparkles.

“It’s okay, no need to be embarrassed! I’ll be rooting for you!”

“...Oh, really?”

Something just wasn’t sitting right. But rather than questioning things and potentially inviting her hatred, it was a lot easier to just leave the misunderstanding be and accept her support. Besides, he had no chance of getting his story to Elize without knowing where she was.

“Do you know where Elize is right now? Did she set off for the castle by carriage?”

The girl frowned. “It’s not ‘Elize’; refer to her as ‘Lady Elizabeth.’” But despite her complaint, she still answered his question. “The carriage was headed for town, so I’m thinking they’re going to Applewood Station. I doubt they’ve arrived yet; they departed not long before we left our dorm.”

The classroom did not have anything as extravagant as a wall-

mounted clock, so Bastian produced a pocket watch from inside his uniform.

“So about thirty minutes ago. Applewood Station’s three hours by carriage, right?”

“Yes. But bear in mind they’d also have to wait for the train, so you might be able catch her at the platform.”

But once she was on board, it would probably be too late.

“Hahhhhhh.” Bastian let out a deep breath. “I’ve been slacking off a lot lately, so I don’t know for sure, but... if I go all out, I just might be able to catch them on their way.”

“Pardon?”

“Well, I’m leaving early. Tell the teacher I said hi!”

Bastian scooped up his school bag and dashed out of the classroom. His classmates watched him, rather confused, while the girl who was still under some strange misunderstanding waved her handkerchief encouragingly.

If she’s not queen yet, I should still be okay to hand my book over. It may be hard to get her feedback, but Elize’s a stickler for this kinda stuff, so I’m sure she’ll write letters.

Bastian was treating the situation quite casually, but only because he had absolutely no understanding of High Britannia’s political landscape.

Bastian sprinted through the cold April air. There was a sharp pain in his chest, and he was barely able to catch his breath; it had been so long since he had run as fast as he could.

His bag was only getting in the way, so after taking out his only necessity—his black book—he tossed the bag somewhere by the side of the road. He then tucked the book into his trousers, tightening his belt to secure it in place.

His leather shoes were quickly wearing down, but this was in no way the fault of their maker. Indeed, no shoe in the world was designed to endure a human who could run as fast as a horse.



The knight’s name was Graham. He was the eldest son of a distinguished house that had served High Britannian royalty for generations. The sword he had spent years of training to master in his hand and the pride of his clan in his heart, he took on this mission having resolved to become the princess’s shield.

Even when laws changed and the industrial revolution transformed people’s lifestyles, the royal guard would honor traditions and protect the customs of their forefathers. Yet despite that, Graham had dared to use the royal carriage as bait, entrusting six of his

subordinates with the bright red mantles of the royal guard and telling them to protect the green carriage. It was possible that they might meet their demise at the hands of assassins, but this had been no mystery to them—these were true patriots.

By using the steam train, Graham and the other five knights had managed to jump ahead of the decoy and safely meet up with Princess Elizabeth. He had considered leading an army to retrieve her, but that would leave the palace and the sickly queen inadequately staffed. Furthermore, the preparations and transit required to lead such large numbers would take up far more time—time he did not have to spare.

He had nothing but apprehensions... but all was going well so far.

To prioritize speed, they were using a small carriage only pulled by two horses. St. Edward's Private Academy was so far to the east of High Britannia that it could be considered a backwater—in fact, just a little more east and one would reach the ocean. As it was a remote region, the roads were not properly maintained, and there were no coach relay stations; the same horses would need to pull their carriage all the way up to the train station, so they couldn't risk pushing them too hard.

As six horsemen would be conspicuous, four sandwiched the carriage—two on either side—while Graham and another sat across from Elizabeth. It was a four-seater carriage. Apart from the princess, their only fellow traveler was the owner and driver of this borrowed coach.

It was a quiet trip; Elizabeth hadn't said a word since they left the school.

“.....”

“Are you feeling unwell?” Graham asked.

Elizabeth shook her head. “No, there is no issue. I am a little tense, but... more importantly, I deeply regret not honoring one of my promises.”

“A promise to one of your school friends?”

“Yes. But it was a silly promise between children. I'm sure he will understand.”

“It is a matter of course.” Graham didn't ask for the details, instead nodding and offering words of agreement to pep her up.

A boy. Graham's heart sank upon hearing the beautiful young princess mention a young man of a similar age to herself, but he very quickly reassured himself that it was nothing to worry about. Elizabeth was a wise woman; she would not allow private affairs to impede her work. From now on, her life would be devoted to her country.

As these thoughts passed through his head, Graham realized he had been unwittingly staring at Elizabeth. She cast her eyes down.

“Mn...”

“M-My apologies, Lady Elizabeth.”

Graham averted his gaze to the outside world passing by. Trees spread out around them, as far as the eye could see. They were following a highway that cut straight through the forest, though it wasn’t paved. It must have rained the night before, as there were pools of water here and there.

This time, Elizabeth posed a question.

“...Have you ever written a story before?”

“You mean, like, a book? No. Aside from my studies, reports are just about the only thing I’ve ever written.”

“That’s quite normal.”

“What about you, Lady Elizabeth?”

“No... I don’t believe I have any stories worth telling.”

Graham deliberately went silent, not wanting to probe into the matter any further. He felt that Elizabeth gave off an air of vulnerability when talking about the subject, and while that was both befitting of someone her age and a charming quality for a young woman to have, it was not something one would want to see in a monarch.

It’s okay, there’s nothing to worry about. Once she’s crowned, she will no longer be led astray by such worldly concerns. This is just a transitionary period—the moment before a butterfly emerges from its cocoon.

Or so that was what Graham believed.

All of a sudden, a gunshot echoed through the forest, immediately followed by a nearby scream.

“The cabman’s been shot!” yelled one of the knights.

Graham’s heart skipped a beat. They were riding in a box-shaped carriage. Their only doors were on the sides, meaning the cabman’s perch could only be accessed from the outside. It wouldn’t be easy for them to change drivers.

The cries of another knight could be heard outside. “Whip the horses, and don’t stop until we’ve reached town! It’s our only option!”

Graham placed a hand on his sword. His mind was racing.

What’s going on!?

The other knight inside the carriage had reached for his sword as well. His face was pale, his shoulders trembling.

“A-An ambush?”

“Then it must be bandits. There’s no way Princess Margaret’s faction could have caught on to us!”

“Ye— Whoa! A-Aren’t we going too fast!?”

The carriage was beginning to shake violently; they were clearly moving a lot faster than before. The forest path snaked left and right,

and while a horse would normally be able to traverse it with relative ease, the carriage was too heavy for these turns. The fact that the highway was also rough and unmaintained only made matters worse.

They were going too fast. A sudden bump in the road threw them into the air, and Graham could feel the carriage begin to tip over.

“Egad! Lady Elizabeth—!!”

“Kyah!”

Graham threw his arms around the girl sitting across from him. Then came the impact.

The other knight in the carriage let out a pained yelp, while Graham suffered a sharp blow to the head. His consciousness faded as several more impacts struck the carriage until, eventually, it came to a stop.

Graham opened his eyes. He was sure he had only been unconscious for a few seconds, but how was he to know whether it had actually been minutes, or even hours? Carefully, he checked to make sure the girl was still wrapped in his arms.

“Lady Elizabeth, are you okay!?”

“...Y-Yes.”

“Thank heavens... Can you move?”

“I think so.”

The carriage was on its side. The knight riding with them hadn’t been so lucky; his head was grotesquely twisted in a direction that shouldn’t have been possible. But there was no time for a moment of silence.

“Lady Elizabeth, we must get out at once!”

Graham clambered up the seat, placing a hand on the side door that had become the roof. There was no way the enemy could have reached them yet. The carriage had been racing at a breakneck speed before tipping over; surely they had been able to distance themselves from the enemy who had ambushed them.

“Lady Elizabeth, please have one of the knights take you on his horse. It won’t be very comfortable but please, save our punishment for when you’ve reached the castle!”

“Wh-What about you!?”

“...I shall catch up later.”

Graham picked Elizabeth up and prepared to go outside. He had no idea how numerous their enemy was. If there were too many foes, the most he could do was buy her some time. But regardless—

“Against petty brigands, I won’t lose, no matter how many there are!”

“Are they really brigands?”

“They must be.”

Graham had almost no information to work with. He hadn’t even

seen the enemy yet. That was why he needed to speak to the knights who had been surrounding the carriage; once he had a better idea what was going on, he would be able to make a decision. He could only hope they had followed. He needed to place Elizabeth in their care. And so, he pushed the door open and climbed out of the carriage.

His eye was immediately drawn to the motionless body of a fallen horse. Face-down on the ground nearby was a knight dressed in a black overcoat. The others were there too—all of Graham's comrades, limp and unmoving.

"Wh-What could have...!?"

"...Are they... d-dead...?"

Elizabeth's voice was quivering. Though a number of wars had taken place in her lifetime, this girl had been attending a relatively peaceful academy for nobles in the countryside. This was most likely the first time she had ever seen someone die in battle, so her unrest was understandable.

Even Graham was struggling to keep his calm. He had experience on the front lines, but it had been quite some time since he had stepped foot on the battlefield. Not to mention these were his comrades lying before him.

The important thing, he noted, is that the enemy is stronger than expected. Strong enough to take down members of the royal guard.

Footsteps approached from further down the road—the footsteps of soldiers. They held spears and guns, and wore the light armor of the High Britannian Army. The man leading them seemed to be the commander of a border battalion; he was wearing the blue uniform of a commissioned officer, with gold medals decorating his chest.

"You wretch! What unit are you from!? Did you attack knowing we're the royal guard!?" Graham screamed.

"Pahahaha! How can you call yourselves the royal guard? You were traveling through the middle of nowhere in a borrowed carriage, and have tossed aside your symbolic scarlet mantles to don such a vulgar black. Your ancestors must be weeping."

"My ancestors!? You know who we are and yet still you point your gun at me. Know your place!"

"I do this for the good of our nation."

Graham drew his sword and stood to protect Elizabeth. The carriage was behind him, and the forest beyond that.

The soldiers of High Britannia, the commissioned officer at their lead, aimed their guns. They were a short distance away—perhaps thirty paces at most—and only numbered around three hundred.

But Graham was the only knight still standing; it would be near impossible to make an escape while protecting Elizabeth. He wiped

the sweat trailing down his brow.

“...You are an officer of High Britannia. This noble personage is Queen Elizabeth, the lady whom Her Highness Queen Charlotte herself has named as her successor. Do you intend to harm her?”

“Another pacifist queen will only hinder the prosperity of our nation. Are you too stupid to understand that? The royal guard really are as useless as rusted blades.”

“Curse you...”

Not only did the man recognize Graham as a member of the royal guard, he knew that the girl before him was Princess Elizabeth. He readied his gun regardless.

“...Run, Lady Elizabeth,” Graham whispered, “I’ll buy you some time.”

“How could I run!? Do you want to die!?”

“What I want is irrelevant... I was naive. They saw through our decoys.”

“But how...?”

“Princess Margaret’s aide, Colonel Oswald Coulthard. It must be. I’ve heard he’s a sharp one.”

That was why Graham had been so wary. He had given it much thought; had they brought an army to retrieve Elizabeth, there was no chance they would have made it back before the queen died. That was why the royal guard had gone alone.

But in the end, that had been the wrong decision to make. *How did they see through our plan?* Graham couldn’t say, but he knew now that this ambush had been an unavoidable reality.

Their situation was hopeless. Even so, Graham prayed Elizabeth alone would be saved. He gave her a light push on the back.

“Please go! I can’t fight with you around!”

“Y-You can’t die.”

“Of course not. I’ll catch up later!” Graham said. But he knew it was a lie.

Graham glanced to the side to make sure Elizabeth had started running, then took his stance. Countless guns were aimed at him, and they would no doubt open fire should he try to move any closer. His comrades had fallen, and soon he would join them. His one regret was that he had been unable to safely lead the future queen to the palace.

Graham wiped the tears from his eyes. *Oh, dear God in heaven, hast thou abandoned me?*

Elizabeth was gone.

Graham stood firm. His silver armor and steel shield would prove useless against High Britannia’s latest firearms; all he could hope to do was buy her as much time as possible.

The enemy commander raised one hand into the air. Then, he

lowered it.

“Fire!!”

On his command, the air was filled with the crackle of gunfire.



Elizabeth raced through the forest. She had never imagined the situation would be this terrible. Not wanting to cause any trouble for the knights, she had decided to wear leather boots, and thanks to that choice she was able to leave the highway and weave between the trees, straight through the dead branches and twigs littering the ground. Had she worn shoes that matched her best dress, she wouldn't have even been able to run.

Unfortunately, she was still just a sixteen-year-old girl; she had no way of matching up to the trained legs of a soldier, even if they were clad in armor and carrying heavy guns.

The footsteps drew closer and closer. There were around three hundred soldiers. It was unlikely she would be able to hide without someone finding her.

A gunshot rang out, and the trunk of a tree burst open just as Elizabeth raced past it. They could see her.

The other soldiers were drawn to the gunshot. “I see her!” one cried.

Elizabeth could hear brief stints of laughter coming from behind. This was practically a fox hunt. She had never been particularly fond of fox hunts, and she swore that if she survived this, she would never take part in one for the rest of her days.

There was another gunshot, and an intense heat spread through Elizabeth's shoulder.

“Eek!?”

It wasn't the pain or the impact, but the sudden shock that caused her feet to tangle. She fell, her hand catching on a dry branch as it slammed against the ground.

“...!?”

Blood spilled from her pinky finger.

“She's down!” one soldier yelled.

I... I can still move. I can still run. ...But what's the point?

If she got up and continued to run, they would just take aim again. And this time, the shot would do more than just graze her shoulder. One clean round to the head would probably be painless, but the soldiers would most likely aim for her feet first to stop her from escaping. It wasn't hard to imagine that a shot to the stomach would be excruciating.

“Urrgh...”

No matter what she did, this was the end. She felt she had to

apologize to Graham, who had sacrificed himself so that she could get away; to all of the other knights who had died because of her; and to the queen, who had chosen someone like her as her successor. If she drew her last breath here, they would surely be disappointed in her.

Elizabeth also thought of her gorgeous cousin, Margaret. Would war follow when she became queen? They had talked a few times before, but what stuck in Elizabeth's mind the most was how Margaret would simply laugh and say, "I don't know anything about politics; I only care that I'm kept entertained."

Elizabeth also knew that more and more people were advocating war. Those supporters, however, were predominantly men. Elizabeth wanted to apologize to the women—those who would lose their fathers, their brothers, their husbands, and their sons. She wanted to apologize for not being able to protect their dear ones.

All those war advocates had never been in her current situation—fleeing from armed soldiers who were gunning for her life. If only they knew of the horrible, accursed reality that made her regret being born... Then surely they wouldn't even consider going to war.

The footsteps closed in, and the voices grew clearer.

"That was my bullet!"

"No, it was mine!"

"Don't be stupid, I took her down!"

"I'm the one who gave the order!"

It was practically a celebration. What would they do if they knew their target was still alive?

As the soldiers finally caught sight of Elizabeth, their starved eyes met hers.

"She's alive!" someone screamed.

The men's breathing became ragged. They let out a roar like a pack of savage beasts, then charged toward her.

Would Elizabeth be able to maintain her sanity to her last breath? She wasn't confident she could. She was scared. So scared. So scared that she couldn't even muster a prayer. She closed her eyes tight, bracing for the worst, when—

"ELIIIIIZE!!"

Elizabeth heard a familiar voice—the voice of a boy who was clearing the trees faster than the wind, knocking down the soldiers in his path as though they were nothing. He embraced her even more intensely than Graham had.

A series of sharp cracks rang out as the soldiers opened fire once more.

The boy kicked the ground, moving before the bullets could even come close to finding their mark. They tore through the air where Elizabeth had been just a moment ago.

Even though he was holding another person, the boy was still as quick as a deer who had spent its whole life surviving in the forest's depths, zigzagging from tree to tree. He even broke into a smile.

"Hah! You seriously think you'll hit your target when you're this desperate for blood!? You might as well be telling me when and where you're going to shoot!"

"Y-You... No way..."

"Don't talk, Elize! You'll bite your tongue!"

The face of the boy holding her was so close—a boy she had resolved to never meet again.



“Bastian!?”

“What?”

“Wh-Why are *you* here!?”

“I made a promise.”

His casual expression made it seem like this was nothing out of the ordinary, but he was moving like the wind itself. The trees flashed by so quickly that Elizabeth wondered whether they had somehow boarded the steam train.

Ba-da-dum. Ba-da-dum. The noise of Bastian’s feet kicking the ground as he ran sounded like the thunder of a horse’s hooves.

“A promise...?”

“Yeah! You said you’d read my masterpiece when it was done!”

“...Are you a fool?”

“Hey now... Don’t tell me you were lying!”

“I wasn’t lying. Why would I lie about that...? But... you’re telling me you chased down a carriage for the sake of that promise?”

What’s more, he had saved her from soldiers armed with guns.

“Well, this isn’t quite what I had in mind.” Bastian frowned. “I imagined I’d just hand you the book while you were waiting at the station. You’re a real stickler, so I was sure you’d send me your thoughts in a letter or something.”

“I would at least do that much...”

“And then I see that the horses are dead, the people are dead, and the carriage is on its side.”

Elizabeth felt her breath catch in her throat as she thought back to the cabman and the knights who had died. Was Bastian accustomed to human death? He didn’t seem flustered at all.

“Judging by their clothes, I assumed they were the knights who came to get you, but I didn’t see your body among them. So when the next thing I heard was gunshots coming from the woods, it was normal for me to assume you were being chased.”

“If you’re bringing up what’s normal, it’s normal to run when you sense danger.”

“You sure are stupid, Elize. You know that?”

“Eh?”

“Had I done that, you wouldn’t have read my greatest masterpiece. After I spent a whole bloody night working on it, too.”

“...You’re the stupid one here...”

“H-Huh?”

“You... You really are a fool.”

Elizabeth’s voice was quivering.

“Whoa! Hey, Elize, what are you crying about!? Are you hurt!? Were you injured!?”

She wiped the overflowing tears from her eyes with the side of her finger, then meekly shook her head.

“I’m not... hurt... I’m fine...”

She wasn’t injured. Not badly. She was sad over the lives that had been lost. She was happy she had been saved. Sorrow and relief, regret and delight—there were more emotions than she could process. The corners of her eyes grew even warmer.

“Give me a break, would you?” Bastian said wearily, “Is my masterpiece so wonderful it moved you to tears before you even read it?”

“...Idiot.”

Elizabeth in his arms, Bastian raced through the forest as fast and as effortlessly as a horse galloping across an open plain.

Chapter 2: The Seven Days of Silence

Queenstower, audience chamber—

“What did you just say?” asked the hoarse voice of a woman.

Oswald bowed his head in reverence, then repeated himself word for word. “I must humbly report to Her Majesty that... owing to an unfortunate accident during her journey from St. Edward’s Private Academy to the palace, Princess Elizabeth Victoria has gone missing.”

The queen’s complexion had gone beyond pale; she was now a deathly white that starkly contrasted her brilliant red robe and silver crown. Her face had been so worn and wrinkled by her illness that she looked much older than fifty, and while she held the royal emerald scepter, in her hands it seemed more like an old woman’s cane.

“This can’t be... What are the royal guard doing?”

“It really was unfortunate. The royal guard have all been found dead.”

“All six knights of the royal guard were found dead on a country road, and the princess has gone missing... yet you say it was no more than an unfortunate accident?” she probed, her voice now so rough that the words barely escaped her throat.

Oswald’s expression didn’t change in the slightest; there was a mask-like smile spread across his lips. “I do, for it was an unfortunate accident. The knights’ remains were retrieved by a unit who were marching down the path for training purposes. It is indeed a great shame, but I suspect it will only be a matter of time before they stumble upon the princess as well.”

“Cease this discourtesy!” The head butler stationed beside the queen attempted to reprimand him, but quickly faltered into silence when the knights standing on either side of Oswald reached for their swords.

“If any of my actions can be considered discourteous then please accept my apologies, but I swear here and now that I have done nothing but report accurate information.” Oswald’s tone was completely indifferent, offering not even a glimpse of his true emotions.

The queen staggered. “O-Oh... How could this be...?” Her breath became shallow and irregular, and she began letting out a series of small, high-pitched whistles as the air struggled to pass through her throat.

The butler hurriedly moved to support her. "Oh no! Doctors! Get the doctors!"

They must have been standing on alert just outside the room, as the door was immediately thrown open and seven people dressed in white rushed in.

The queen glared as the doctors commenced their treatment. "Hngh... You deceive Princess Margaret, you plunge our country into the flames of war... and for what purpose!? Hn— Hack! Hack!"

Oswald stood in silence for a moment, then spoke plainly. "There is only ever one objective in war. The very existence of a battle between nations depends on there being something to gain, for a nation is simply a gathering of people who have come together to survive. And the survival of any nation ultimately depends on one thing: economic activity. To answer your question, Your Majesty, the purpose of war is money."

"Gh... Curse you, you... you demon! You lead my people to death over your petty coin!?"

"The average human lives for no more than a hundred years; to allow some to die sooner is no major loss. And besides, is it not honorable to surrender your life for the good of your nation?"

"Enough sophistry! To think you would go to such lengths for money... You have a noble title, and have been granted a rank well above what would be expected of someone your age. Is that not enough? What drives you to such lengths for money?"

"This is all so far beyond a petty officer such as myself. I have received more grace than I deserve, and have indeed been blessed with great status."

"...Then why!?"

"For a reason that I imagine one born into such privilege may never be able to understand... While I have been granted status and fortune unbecoming my humble being... to strive for even more is only human." Oswald quite intentionally droned on, watching as the queen clutched her chest in pain.

"Shame be upon you! Urgh!? Gh—!"

"Your Majesty! Please, you mustn't speak anymore!"

Having seemingly decided that it was more important to speak her mind than preserve her remaining strength, the queen ignored the doctor's warning and screamed at Oswald again.

"You sinner taken by greed! You shall fall to the wrath of God, and spend eternity in hell having your entrails torn from your stomach!"

"Oh really? In this petty officer's humble opinion, desire is as common as a pebble by the wayside. If mine is so great as to attract the eyes of God in heaven, then there is no greater honor."

Oswald mimicked the motions of a religious prayer, looking on as the queen gripped her chest. She had begun foaming at the mouth, and the whites of her eyes were starting to show.

“Your Majesty! Your Majesty!” the doctors cried.

Oswald bowed, then excused himself from the audience chamber. He passed through a large door and began the trek down the palace tower, his two fully-armored knights following closely behind.

He eventually reached a passageway; pillars lined the wall on either side, and a red carpet spread down the middle. A black-haired girl wearing a silk dress popped her head out from the shadows.

“Oh my, you’re back early. Have you finished speaking to Aunty?”

“To be graced with the lovely Princess Margaret’s presence... This petty officer is so honored he might just swoon where he stands.”

“Oh, is that so? How troublesome. Please do hold off on fainting until you’ve told me what I want to hear, Oswald.”

“...This inelegant space does not suit someone as noble as Princess Margaret. If we could move to the terrace...”

“Of course.”

They walked out to a terrace overlooking the courtyard where a number of elaborately designed tables and chairs had been set up. It was just past noon. It was warmer than one would expect for the middle of April, and a gentle breeze was blowing.

Margaret sat down, casually resting one leg over the other and exposing her pale thighs from beneath her skirt. Oswald stood at attention beside her, holding his hands behind his back as he carefully surveyed their surroundings. The two armored knights stood on watch in the doorway, while a maid was busy brewing tea.

Margaret urged Oswald to speak. He bowed deeply and obliged. “...An audience with Her Majesty... was too much for this petty officer. It was a disgrace on my part.”

“Oh dear, did you fail at something?”

“I had no choice but to present provocations no better than a shoddy bluff... I cannot even begin to explain the extent of my regret. It is because of this petty officer’s blunder that the commander at Applewood failed to subdue Princess Elizabeth. By the original contrivance, I would merely have needed to show Her Majesty the princess’s remains.”

“You’re right. Instead, you had to say this and that to push auntie into a corner. What a troublesome man you are.”

“My apologies.”

“Do you think Liz is all right?”

“According to the report, she was saved by an unknown boy, and the two fled toward the mountains.”

“I see. In that case, she’ll be coming to the palace. I can’t wait. Do

you think she'll bring one of those famous Applewood pies back for me? The weather's good enough that it should last the journey."

"...The palace? But most of the soldiers are on our side, and Princess Elizabeth should understand that we are plotting to assassinate her."

"That doesn't matter. If she doesn't come to the castle, I'll become queen, won't I? And then I'd lead High Britannia to war."

"So she'll come all alone just to prevent a war?"

"That's right. That's the sort of girl Liz is. Isn't it wonderful? I should bake a tart for her. Dear me, that girl has always hated strawberries. She's not good at telling whether they're sour or sweet... Fufufu."

"Is that so?"

"I just can't wait. Do you think she'll be here soon? I'll bake a strawberry tart."

"A splendid idea."

So her actions transcend personal interest...

Oswald understood that presenting the princess's corpse would be a major blow to the queen's psyche so, in response to Elizabeth's recent escape, he had planned to have the soldiers search the mountain and the surrounding villages. Elizabeth coming back to the palace alive would throw a massive wrench in his plans. He had considered the princess somewhat of a clever girl, but perhaps he had been taking her too lightly.

I should have the soldiers I sent to Applewood keep watch over the roads.

Margaret brought her teacup to her lips. "I've been meaning to ask—the royal guard set up body doubles, did they not?"

"It is as you say. They sent the royal carriage and had six subordinates put on disguises to act as bait."

"How could you tell they were decoys? I'm intrigued."

"That is very simple. While the royal guard may be unified and loyal, those under them are not so monolithic. In most cases, money is enough to sway the human heart."

"So that's it. You just bribed their subordinates."

"My apologies, I am aware it was not a plan great enough to stave off the wise Princess Margaret's boredom. Sir Graham's own loyalty was so strong that he never even considered that others may not share his devotion."

"Fufufu... And what about your loyalty?"

Margaret directed him an entertained, provocative glance. She crossed her legs the other way, exposing her thighs to a precarious degree as her skirt moved. Her pale skin was almost radiant.

"If I may make my plea to my most esteemed Princess Margaret...

This petty officer has already transcended loyalty. What nonsense would it be, if I could only serve you with a strong heart? For each and every member of humanity need not think, speak and act, if it is not for the happiness of Her Highness. I exist only for your noble purposes.”

“Right... Hey, Oswald?”

“Yes?”

“There’s something that has been troubling me for a while now... What tea do you think pairs best with strawberry tart?”

“How about Darjeeling with honey?”

“Wouldn’t that be too sweet?”

“It would offset the sourness of the strawberries, would it not?”

“Fufufu... You’re right. I’ll go with that. Do you think Liz will be here soon?”

“The wind is picking up, and you mustn’t catch a cold. Isn’t it about time you returned to your room?”

“Very well. Oh, and Oswald.”

“Yes?”

“I like Liz. She’s a good girl.”

“Certainly.”

“So when you bring her to the palace, please won’t you let me welcome her before aunty? Before she goes rotten, of course. But I’m sure she’ll keep in this weather. Even the Applewood pies keep.”

“As you wish.” Oswald reverently lowered his head even lower than he had to the queen.

Margaret stood, then headed for the door connecting the terrace to the tower, her silk dress swaying as she walked.



Bastian was terribly nimble in the forest. When he was a child, his teachers and tutors would always be chasing him for one reason or another, and while he could always feel the thrill of the chase, it was never something he feared.

He stumbled upon a brook. While he could have dived in to escape, it was still April; the water would be cold, and the girl in his arms didn’t seem like the sort who would come out unscathed from that. Instead, he ran along the riverbed, eventually coming across a brick watermill. There was no one around, and the door wasn’t locked, so he decided they could take a break inside.

It was a rather simple construction—a roof of wooden planks over four brick walls. Inside were all of the tools required to process wheat. There was also a small fireplace that already had firewood inside, but Bastian refrained from abusing the absent owner’s hospitality even more than he already was.

Bastian plopped down in an old, withered chair. “Phew... It’s been so long since I went all out. I’m pooped.”

“Err... Thank you for saving me. Really.” The girl sat down at the table across from him and lowered her head, but Bastian just waved a hand dismissively.

“Don’t worry about it. You’ve saved me plenty of times, Elize. Ah wait, it’s ‘Elizabeth’ now, right?”

“My real name is Elizabeth, but... you can call me whatever you prefer.”

“Well then, since I’m already used to it, you happy for me to stick to using ‘Elize’?”

“I don’t see why not.” She happily nodded. “I was ‘Elize’ just this morning, and yet it already feels so nostalgic...”

“That silk dress really suits you.”

“Oh...? Does it really?”

“It does. Though I think I still prefer your school uniform.” It wasn’t until the words had already left his mouth that Bastian realized they could very easily be misunderstood, but Elize simply gave him a carefree smile.

“Fufu... Yes, I’m more at ease in my uniform. Come to think of it, when you say I’ve saved you, are you talking about at school?”

“Right. They were always picking on me because I come from Belgaria. I should’ve said some other country instead.”

“I never knew you were that strong, Bastian. Why did you always put up with their abuse?”

“I made a promise to my grandpa... One fight, and they’d bring me right back home.”

“You’re surprisingly earnest.”

“Ah—!!”

All of a sudden, Bastian turned pale.

“What’s wrong!?”

“Th-That whole thing back there didn’t count as a fight, did it? Don’t fight, don’t reveal your identity, and don’t butt into foreign politics—that was my promise.”

“I wouldn’t say it was a fight. Though ‘don’t reveal your identity’ must mean you’re not really the son of a count, are you?”

“Ah, no, th-that’s...”

“A brown-haired, crimson-eyed boy called Bastian. From what I’ve heard, red eyes are a characteristic exclusive to Belgarian royalty.”

“What could you be talking about?” Bastian pulled a special pair of glasses out of his pocket. They had black frames and smoke-crystal lenses.

“Why are you putting sunglasses on all of a sudden? And indoors, too?”

“W-Well, my demon eyes are itching to go on a bit of a rampage, you see. These are sacred glasses that can seal away the powers of darkness.”

“As I recall, the third prince’s name was Heinrich Trois Bastian de Belgaria.”

“Never heard of him.”

“...Very well. I promise not to tell anyone. No matter who you are, it doesn’t change the fact that you saved my life.”

“Y-Yeah.”

“I know I already asked, but did you really come here to hand me your book? You really forced your way through hundreds of soldiers just for that?”

“I did. Well, that was why I was chasing you, at least. I got you out of there because we’re friends.”

“...Friends?”

“Huh? Hey, don’t look so shocked! If having me as a friend is really that embarrassing, I swear I’m gonna throw myself into the brook!”

“...When word started to spread that I was actually a princess, I was sure that no one would call me a friend anymore. It’s... somewhat of a relief.”

“Hm. Sounds like High Britannian royalty’s got it rough.”

“I’d say Belgianian royalty are harder to approach.”

“I dunno about that... I get along pretty well with that Eddie bloke from the House of Balzac. He’s got no annoying reservations, and doesn’t act all superior even though he’s my elder. Oh, right, and his gramps is strong as all hell! He actually taught me a thing or two about fencing, ya know.”

“I see. A duke, eh?”

“...Urk! Ah, no, err... What I meant was, uh... That’s just what I’ve read in the papers!”

“Ah, yes, yes. I understand.” Elize smiled.

Bastian decided it was probably a wise move to change the subject. “So, um, what was that army all about? They looked like part of the High Britannian Army, but wouldn’t it be pretty strange for them to be pointing their guns at a princess?”

“It’s just your average dispute between houses. This country’s industrial technology has advanced by leaps and bounds over the past few years. As a consequence, opinion has started to spread that we should go to war and use that power to make other countries submit to us.”

“Sounds reasonable enough.”

“Does the notion really come so naturally to you men? I’m against it. If we go to war, people will die.”

“Can’t argue with that, but... Belgaria’s been at war since long, long before I was born. I don’t really get what it means to *not* be at war.”

“You don’t get it?”

“Err, well, I do think it’s a good thing if people aren’t dying...”

“...Good. Because if we do go to war, it’ll be with Belgaria.”

“Hah?”

“High Britannia shares its main border with the Belgarian Empire. Its other neighbors are mostly small countries, though I suppose if you wanted to cross the sea there’s also Hispania and those in the far east.”

Bastian furrowed his brow. “Have they gone loopy? Even if they do have some new cannons, they’re not gonna win. I mean, just compare how much experience our troops have, for example... How many hundreds of years do you think Belgaria’s been at war?”

“...But if victory is possible, then they should go to war. Is that what you think, Bastian?” There was a tinge of concern in Elize’s voice, but Bastian wasn’t the sort to just say what a girl wanted to hear.

“If you can win, then attack. That’s what the army’s there for.”

“But what would be the point of going to war? The country will flourish without it. In fact, do we not both stand to gain more if we focus on diplomacy instead?”

“Eh? Do we really?”

The idea that a nation could do better without war—it was something that Bastian had never before considered.

Elize nodded. “Let’s say there are two villages—one where everyone is always fighting, and one where everyone works together. Which one would live longer and be more prosperous?”

“...Whichever one wins when they inevitably go at one another?”

“Perhaps they would be more prosperous—immediately following their victory, that is. But when misfortune strikes and the village is weak, will the people they defeated in battle help them get back on their feet?”

“Yeah, that’s not going to happen. The way I see it, that’d be their chance to get back at them. Several times over.”

Elize nodded once again. “For a hundred years, we may prosper from winning that war. But what will happen in two, perhaps three, hundred beyond that? Does any country prosper forever?”

“Forever, eh...?”

Bastian barely knew anything about Belgaria’s past. History as a whole was a matter that generally only interested a small portion of curious folk. The Empire’s history stretched back 851 years. There had been a time when its capital had fallen, and a period when more than

half of its territory had been captured. There was no way of telling what might happen over the next hundred years.

“But would you even live long enough to see the possible consequences?” he asked.

“When one becomes a ruler, they must think not of their own happiness, but of the future of the nation.”

“I see.”

Now that he thought about it, Bastian did recall his imperial tutor saying the same thing. *“For those who are in a position to lead the nation, it is crucial to value the nation as a whole over individu-blah, blah, blah...”* He hadn’t really been listening.

“And that reasoning is why I am against war.”

“Uh-huh.”

“But the country is all for it. These factions presumably want to make my cousin Margaret queen.”

“Does she want war?”

Elize thought for a moment. “...That woman... probably doesn’t care either way.”

“What do you mean?”

“She spends each and every day trying to alleviate her boredom. She is the eldest daughter of a prince and holds the blessed position of High Britannia’s first princess... She has kind parents, skilled subordinates... She’s beautiful, healthy, affluent, with enough of anything she could ever want... But what she was never given was a role to fill.”

“That’s something.”

“And that’s why she spends her days mind-numbingly bored.”

“Now that’s one thing I really don’t get. If you’re bored, just sneak out and play.”

“No matter what Margaret does, she very quickly grows tired of it. She picks things up faster than most people, and she’s very resourceful.”

Even the Belgian royal family didn’t have anyone that perfect. First Prince Auguste was in a terrible state, while Second Prince Latrielle was constantly worked to death by the Ministry of Military Affairs. Apparently Fourth Princess Argentina had been sent off to the border to work as a commander despite being both a woman and a minor, but he had no idea whether she was managing to pull that off or not. The fifth-born child had died at a young age, and Felicia—who had been moved up to the position of fifth princess as a result—hadn’t left her room since she was a child. In a sense, perhaps Bastian himself was most similar to Margaret—after all, he had been blessed with both health and affluence.

“I used to be like that.”

“You did?”

“Then one day I met this real weirdo in the army library—he was turning through pages like his life depended on it.”

“Were you there to read too?”

“When I flipped over all the stone statues in the courtyard, the grand chamberlain snapped and led an order of knights to hunt me down, so I was hiding where they’d least expect me.”

“...Hah.”



It happened in spring, about two years ago—

It was always a pain whenever Bastian was recognized, so he would wear sunglasses when outside of the palace to hide his red eyes. But as he spoke to the young man seated beside him, Bastian wondered whether he even needed to wear them; the young man was so fixated on the book he was reading that he probably wouldn’t have noticed if Bastian had been wearing nothing at all.

“Is it really that interesting? That book?”

“Mn? Well... Let’s see... It’s a bit iffy.”

“A bit iffy”? Then why are you still reading it? It must be a real drag.”

“I read for the same reason that I breathe.”

“Because you’d die if you stopped breathing?”

“Yes, that’s right. And it’d kill me to not finish this book.”



“Are you sick or something?”

“Hahahah... I get that a lot.”

“Well, I detest reading. I’d much prefer racing horses or practicing swordsmanship,” Bastian said with a shrug.

The young soldier pulled out a few books from the pile that was stacked up on the desk. “This novel is about a superhuman swordsman. He fights a great monster 100 cubits (44 m) high. It’s one of those battles where things become so tense that you actually begin to sweat.”

“H-Hm?”

“And the heroine uses magic in this one. The protagonist is her strong assistant and believe me, he really is a tough cookie.”

“Wh-What? Magic!? Are you one of those heretics!?”

“Oh, pardon me. You’ve never heard of the Empire’s bestselling fiction? I thought noble sons around your age would be their biggest reader base.”

“You think so? Again, I despise books...”

“I’d recommend this one. Ah, no, actually, perhaps it’s a bit extreme. The battles are as cool as it gets, but the heroine barely leaves an impression.”

“Huh!? Err... That’s... Well, whatever works. The battles are cool, yeah? All right, I’ll borrow it and read a bit.”

“You will? I hope you like it. The author’s around your age.”

“Eh!? Aren’t all books written by grumpy adults!?”

“That really depends. A lot of books geared toward younger male audiences are written by young authors, I assume because they have similar sensibilities. In other cases, they’re written by adult authors who are still children at heart.”

“Do you write as well?”

“...The idea does interest me... but that would just give me less time to read.”

“I-I see.”

Bastian gazed at the book. A proper publication. To think this was written by a child his age... *That’s seriously amazing.*

The young soldier glanced at him. “...If you ever do write a novel... perhaps I’ll be reading your masterpiece one day.” The man too delicate to be a soldier offered a gentle smile. Bastian responded with a nod, putting the book under one arm.

All of a sudden, a loud stomping could be heard as a black-bearded military man closed in. “Oi, you! Soldier! Your break ended ages ago! You plan on keeping the marquis waiting!?” he yelled, completely red in the face.

“Geh!?”

The young man hurriedly stood up. At the same time, a clamor was forming around the entrance; the strongest unit of the Empire's First Army, the White Tiger Brigade, had appeared at a place as ill-suited as the military library.

The robust knights in white pointed at Bastian. "There he is!" "Crap."

And so Bastian ran. He weaved between the desks, then kicked open the window and jumped, the borrowed book still in his arms.



After some rest in the watermill, Bastian led Elize back into the forest. They were back on the highway before long, and were in the city of Applewood by dusk.

"I'm surprised you didn't get us lost, Bastian."

"Really? I've got a good grasp on how far I've moved and I remember what the map looks like, so there was no way I was gonna get lost. Sure, I may have been a little off earlier, but that's because I was so focused on dodging bullets."

"Hah... You sure are a weirdo."

"You think so? It's something Latrielle can do as well. Oh, but Argentina's hopeless when it comes to directions. She's a riot, that girl. She actually gets lost in the woods."

"Getting lost in the woods is normal."

Hearing those words, the confused Bastian couldn't help but cock his head to the side.

Applewood was a fortified city enclosed by stone walls. It was the largest town in the eastern region, bustling with a vast number of people. Even though the sun was beginning to set, the roadsides were still lined with open stalls, the touting voice of merchants making the atmosphere as lively as a festival. Despite how much further ahead the country was technologically, the lives of commoners in High Britannia didn't seem much different from those in Belgaria.

Bastian wore his sunglasses just to be safe. In a city this large, it wouldn't be strange for at least one person to be able to recognize a member of Belgian royalty.

"...Not too many soldiers," he whispered into Elize's ear. Her shoulders immediately shook as if she had been tickled.

"Mn. And not every battalion's on Margaret's side. I'm sure they each have their reasons."

"I don't know whether this Margaret gal's the ringleader or someone else is giving the orders, but trying to kill the royal successor after they've already been named is pretty terrible."

"I need to get to the palace."

"Just leave it to me. I'll make sure you get there."

“Thank you, Bastian.”

There was no telling who would be after Elize. Fearing for her safety, she huddled up to him for protection. Her shoulder had never been this close back when they would walk the path between the schoolhouse and the dorm, and for some reason it only strengthened Bastian’s desire to keep her safe no matter what.

“You think they’ll let us stay?” he asked.

“They should if we just say we’re students.”

“Can’t quite tell them you’re a princess, huh?”

“Right. That’d be too dangerous.”

They had considered going to the mayor of Applewood, but there was no telling what faction he was a part of. If he turned out to be on Margaret’s side, there was a good chance he would reveal Elize’s location to the army.

They entered a shop in town before the sun had completely disappeared over the horizon. It was a two-story building made of white brick, housing a bar on the first floor and guest rooms on the second. This was the standard appearance of a lodging facility, not only in High Britannia, but in Belgaria as well.

Inside were four four-seater tables, as well as a row of six seats along the counter. It was rather busy; men who had just come back from work were busy chatting and downing ale.

An elderly woman stood behind the counter. “What’ve we got here? This is no place for children,” she said, immediately refusing them in a hoarse voice.

How are we supposed to explain this?

While Bastian wavered, Elize spoke up without hesitating. “My apologies. We’re students, and one of our family members has fallen ill, so we’re on our way home. Someone from our house was supposed to come by train to pick us up, but they must be running late... Would you please let us stay the night?”

“Hm...” The woman leaned over the counter, appraising them from head to toe. “You got money, right?”

“Ah, err...”

Bastian fished through his pockets. He had made a pretty tragic blunder; the bag he had tossed aside contained not only his school supplies, but also his money.

“All I’ve got is an old pocket watch, an even older dagger, and my masterpiece. That ain’t good. No matter how you look at it, the only valuable thing I’ve got on me is the book...”

“Will my handkerchief do? It was given to me by my mother. I haven’t used it much, and I’m sure it has some value.”

The old woman stuck out a hand, and Elize gave her the handkerchief. The look in her eyes changed in an instant.

“Well now... This might just be silk...”

“It’s no trouble if that’s not enough. We can just search for another inn.”

“Urk. Y-Yes, well... It does look like you’re in need of help... I’ll let you stay. But as a heads-up, we only offer breakfast and dinner.”

“Thank you!” Elize bowed her head.

Bastian put a hand on his chest and let out a sigh of relief. “Good on ya, Elize!”

“Oh, it was nothing. We’ve been walking this whole time, so I just really wanted a bed to sleep in.”

The woman tilted her head. “Incidentally, are you two siblings?”

“Eh?” they chimed in unison.

“Would you be okay sharing a room?”

“Ah, err...” Elize’s cheeks turned a deep red, while Bastian awkwardly scratched his head.

“I’m fine sleeping outside,” he said.

“Don’t be silly, it’s still cold out! Madam, of course we’ll make do with one room. We are brother and sister, after all.”

“Got it. Then here’s your key. Just leave it on the counter when you check out. Well, it’s already too late for children to be out walking the streets. If you want a meal, eat it now. We’re about to pack up.”

“Great!”

“I hope she’s got meat...” Bastian said, earning him a sneer from the old woman.

“Oh, I do hope it’s to the taste of a noble boy.”

They were served a thin chicken soup with a hard bread roll. Normally, the meal would come with a mug of beer, but given that they were kids, the inn had made a special exception and prepared them each a glass of water. Beer could last for more than a week, whereas water would go bad in three days, even in the colder seasons. Water so pure it could be drunk without needing to be boiled was, in a sense, a greater luxury than beer.

Bastian gulped down a spoonful of soup, then let out a very pleased “Delish!” He had spent all of last night writing his novel and hadn’t eaten anything proper all day on account of skipping breakfast that morning. Then to top it off, he had raced down the roads from school, gotten into a scuffle in the forest, and walked all the way to town. He was naturally starved.

The warm soup soothed his empty stomach. Its light flavoring was perfect for a thirsting palate.

“This is amazing! Lady, you’d make a fine chef in the Belgianian courts! Seriously!”

“Hah, looks like you know how to give a compliment. It was the

old man who made it.”

“It really is delicious...”

Elize was in a similar situation—there were even tears welling up in her eyes. She had resolved to give up her normal life at school to become queen, and was then very nearly killed on that same day, having been showered with bullets and chased around by soldiers.

I can't even imagine how fatigued she must be.

“Well, all that aside—seconds, please!”

“Hey, Bastian...”

The old woman let out a snort. “Hah! Don’t be greedy! Just this once, you hear?”

“Gotcha. Thank you.”

“Ah... Then... me too,” Elize said, her cheeks once again going red as she held out her plate.

With food in their bellies, Bastian and Elize made their way to the room they had been given. Upon opening the door, they froze; the room had a desk, a chair, and a single, sizable bed.

“Is this... meant for one person?” Bastian asked.

“There are two blankets, so it’s probably a bed for two... W-We’re going to sleep here... together, are we...?” Elize was red from ear to ear. Then all of a sudden, her knees gave out. Bastian quickly grabbed onto her shoulder to keep her up.

“O-Oi, are you okay!?”

“Hyah!?”

He must have taken Elize by surprise, as she immediately lurched away, losing her balance and stumbling over. She only collapsed onto the bed, so there was no risk of her being injured by the fall, but Bastian had reflexively reached out to catch her.

The result: Elize lying faceup on the bed, Bastian on top, pinning her down. Her golden-blond hair was messily spread across the gray sheets, and mixed in with the smells of sweat, dirt and soup was an unrecognizable but strangely enthralling scent.

Elize closed her eyes, her shoulders trembling. “You... can’t...”

“C-Crap.”

“Hah... Foo...” She started breathing heavily. “...Umm... N-Not yet...”

“Wait, don’t get angry! Th-This is— I just fell over, okay!? I’m tired too!”

“Ahem!”

Someone cleared their throat behind them. Both Bastian and Elize immediately shot up and turned to face the door. It was wide open, and standing in the doorway was the old woman, scowling.

“Hah! You should save that sorta thing for *after* you lock the

door.”

“We’re not doing anything!” Elize declared, almost shrieking.

Bastian shook his head in an attempt to back her up. His cheeks were so hot that he wondered if he’d be able to shoot a new special technique from his face.

Oh, and lady, we’re supposed to be siblings... What do you mean by “that sorta thing”!?

When they eventually did climb into bed together, their backs brushed against each other ever so slightly.

“Kyah!?”

“Erk, sorry.”

“I-It’s fine. We just don’t have much space to work with.”

“R-Right.”

They shared their considerations as their hearts pounded away, but eventually, their accumulated fatigue lulled the both of them into a deep slumber.



The next morning—

Bastian and Elize were eating breakfast in the dining area on the first floor. It was still early, but there were a few other people eating at the nearby tables.

Breakfast consisted of more hard-baked bread—this time topped with egg and thick slices of ham—and a glass of water. It might have been considered a little excessive from the perspective of a commoner, but compared to the feasts enjoyed by kings and nobles it was a very modest meal.

As they were Belgarian and High Britannian royalty, Bastian and Elize could eat as much extravagant food as they wanted back home, but they both had enough common sense not to make comparisons. It wasn’t that Bastian or Elize had grown accustomed to town life; they simply had a better understanding of how commoners lived than the average noble would.

“Thank you for the wonderful breakfast, madam.”

“That wasn’t half bad, lady.”

“Hah! You don’t have to make such a big deal over every little thing. Just eat up and leave already!”

All of a sudden, the front door was thrown open so forcefully that they thought it might come off its hinges. In the doorway was an elderly man wearing linen clothes, holding a newspaper in his right hand and, for some reason, a frying pan in his left.

“Big news!”

“Hah!? Settle down,” said the old woman, “What happened?”

“The queen is dead!” The man held up the paper, the front page of which read:

Her Majesty Charlotte Stillart, the queen of High Britannia, has been called back to heaven.

Stillart Year 42, April 15th.

Her medical report has been released by Parliament.

Her Majesty passed late in the night due to a disease of the heart, and has set off for the Kingdom of God.

The Seven Days of Silence will begin on the 16th. Please wear your mourning clothes.

The customers eating breakfast cried out in surprise, while the old woman offered a prayer to God in heaven. Bastian looked at Elize. Her face was pale, and her lips were quivering.

“Wh-What do I do...? Bastian...”

“Oi, get a grip.”

“It’s all my... How could this be...? I... didn’t make it in time...”

“This has got nothing to do with you. We went over this yesterday—the knights were expecting this to happen! Where do you factor into that!?”

“Ye... Yeah...”

She was clearly distraught; the noisy guests and the old woman gave them dubious looks. Bastian took Elize by the shoulders and helped her to stand.

“We’re going. You’re okay to walk, right?”

“Y-Yeah.”

He wanted to give her some time to rest, but not here; she was better off somewhere away from prying eyes. And so they left the inn and started walking down the main road. Bastian wore his sunglasses just in case. The last thing they wanted right now was to walk into someone who might recognize a member of Belgian royalty.

Stalls were already displaying their goods, and the street was bustling with shoppers, but the atmosphere was much different from the day before. News of the queen’s death was spreading through hushed whispers, and crowds had formed around those selling newspapers. There were even some people who had crumbled to their knees and started crying. The queen was the symbol of High Britannia, and so many countrymen grieved as though they had lost their own mother. Elize was no different.

“Waaah... Your Highness... Aunty... You were such a kind soul...”

“.....”

Bastian gave her a moment to let out her sorrow, watching as she

stooped down into a corner and began to sob. Under normal circumstances, this would be terribly conspicuous behavior, but today was an exception—a number of similar scenes could be observed on this street alone.

A while passed before Elize finally calmed down. She wiped her reddened eyes, then said in a quavering voice: “I’m... sorry... Bastian.”

“You feeling any better?”

“Yes...”

“Then let’s get our thoughts in order. This may be harsh, but bear with me.”

“...Okay.”

“Her Majesty passed last night, on the 15th. Today is the 16th.”

Bastian waited for an affirmative nod from Elize, then continued.

“Mourning will start today and end on the 22nd.”

“Correct.”

“And the new queen will be decided on the 23rd.”

“That’s supposed to be the case. Parliament will unveil the new queen at the palace for the Daybreak Declaration.”

“You’ve already been chosen as the successor, right?”

“Yes. This is my proof.” She dearly presented her left hand. There was a golden ring wrapped around her ring finger, engraved with a seal that looked like the petals of a flower.

“So that’s the royal crest?”

“The white rose is High Britannia’s national flower. If I go to the palace with this, the faction calling for war will not be able to ignore me, no matter how many supporters they have.”

“And you want to stop the war?”

“Naturally. That was Queen Charlotte’s wish as well.”

“...But at this rate, that Margaret gal is gonna become the new queen.”

“Unless I can reach the palace before her coronation, things will go as the war-supporting faction pleases.”

“She can become queen without the ring?”

“Yes. It’s one thing if the ring bearer is present, but if she is unaccounted for... No one is permitted to search through a late queen’s personal belongings, so as far as anyone would be aware, the ring could just as well have never been passed down at all.”

“I suppose so.”

The journey from Applewood to the palace would take half a day by train, or five days by carriage. On foot, they almost certainly wouldn’t get there in the seven days they had. Bastian sighed. This was going to be a difficult trek.

“If only Her Majesty had just come out and said you were her successor.”

“Perhaps she was about to. She was likely just waiting because I was still a student.”

“Oh, I see.”

“But... as her health worsened, she sent for me in a hurry. I might have made it in time had I reached the train.”

The queen had apparently died late last night. Had Elize managed to board the train at Applewood Station before noon, there was a high chance she would have reached the palace before then.

“She surely told those closest to her that she was naming me as her successor, but there is nothing they can do if I’m nowhere to be found.”

“I guess that makes sense.”

“Can we still use the train?”

“Hm... I doubt it, but we should take a look anyway.”

Bastian led Elize toward the center of town. They arrived just in time to see a pillar of distinctive black smoke billowing into the air; the train must have been pulling into the station. The rhythmic clatter of spinning wheels and the *whoosh* of compressed steam leaving the exhaust grew louder and louder, until eventually the imposing form of the locomotive came into view just across the fence. As it came to a stop, a number of soldiers began to step down from inside the carriages.

“Looks like they’re starting the war already. And Applewood is their first target.”

“This is no time to joke around, Bastian. They’re obviously looking for me.”

“Ah, yeah. I knew that.”

Just the day before, Bastian had knocked about a bunch of High Britannian troops. Princess Margaret—or whoever their leader was—had almost certainly been informed, and had sent even more soldiers in response. Presumably, their orders were to assassinate Princess Elizabeth.

“Looks like the train’s not an option. Let’s go out onto the road. I’m sure there’ll be a carriage that’s willing to take us.”

“Sounds appropriate...”

“Hm?” Bastian made a quizzical noise. Elize was staring at him; she seemed to be at her wits’ end over something.

“.....”

“What’s wrong? You need the bathroom?”

“Fool! Why was that your first assumption!?”

“Sorry, sorry. Then what is it?”

“...Bastian... There’s no going back from here. But you still have one last chance—if you return to school now...”

He inadvertently cocked his head to the side. “What are you even

talking about?"

"B-But the situation is—"

"I made a promise. I'm definitely seeing you to the palace."

"You'd be putting your very life at stake! And all you came here to do was hand me the book you'd written!"

"That's right. And if you die, I won't have anyone to read it. That's enough of a reason for me."

"I... I don't understand what you're saying."

"...I guess we really are similar."

"Eh?"

"I'm like that Margaret gal. Each day just drags on and on... It's boring. I'm not doing this for you—I'm doing it for me. So don't worry about it too much. Just use this weirdo however you see fit."

"Don't—"

"Whoa, over there! Oi, c'mon! This way!"

"Ah!?"

Bastian grabbed Elize by the hand and ran. A number of soldiers had come out onto the main road, but not before the two rushed into an alley.

"That's not good. They might have the town gate under surveillance."

"What now!?"

As they made their way between the brick buildings, luck was clearly not on their side. Their path cut straight past some soldiers who were eating their meals on the backstreet—three opponents.

"H-Hey, is that... Blimey! It's Princess Elizabeth!"

"Halt, you two!"

The third man blew into a whistle, which let out a loud, shrill sound; it was not long at all before more soldiers gathered.

Bastian, still gripping onto Elize's hand, yanked her back. While his hearing was so sharp that he had been able to pick up on the clatter of metal armor across the forest, that talent was of almost no use in the middle of a noisy town. Soldiers who were just squatting down for a meal, for example, would be near indistinguishable from the general everyday bustle.

"One bad thing after another!"

"Bastian, run! Even if you have to leave me behind!"

"Just quit it already, Elize! How are you supposed to shoulder a country with an attitude like that!? You keep putting me first, but if you die then who the hell's gonna prevent the war!? Live, even if you've gotta eat dirt to survive! Live so you can protect the peace, goddammit!"

"Ah..."

Bastian had unintentionally lost his temper, but the apologies

could wait for after they had escaped. They made a frenzied dash from alley to alley. Bastian could visualize how far they had traveled, but didn't have a map of Applewood in his head to guide him. He had a bad feeling in his gut.

They're probably cornering us.

Unless they were able to slip out of the city soon, chances were that they would end up completely surrounded.

"Elize, follow me like your life depends on it! Don't look away! Don't be scared! As long as you don't stop, I'll definitely protect you!"

"Understood!"

And with that, Bastian let go of her hand, trusting that she would stay with him. He intentionally charged straight into the first alley that he knew the soldiers were waiting in. The path was narrow, so only three men stood at the lead. They must not have expected Bastian to come rushing toward them since they frantically attempted to ready their firearms, quite taken aback.

"S-Sto—"

"Too slow!"

Bastian pulled out a dagger—his ridiculously old dagger. He had made off with it when he knew for sure that he would be studying abroad. But it wasn't just any old weapon...

Legend has it that the first emperor of the Belgian Empire, *L'Empereur Flamme*, had received from the faeries an almighty metal known as trystie, which he then used to forge seven blades. Prince Latrielle possessed the second, the *Armée Victoire Volonté*. The seventh, the *Défendre Sept*, had been entrusted to the house that had protected the Empire for generations, and was now in the hands of Duke Eddie. Even Princess Argentina had been granted a weapon, having been given the first emperor's fourth blade, the *Grand Tonnerre Quatre*.

Isn't it unfair that I'm the only person who doesn't have one? Sure, Auguste and Felicia were never given legendary weapons, but that's because they're notoriously sick and can't leave the house. Even Argentina got one, and not only is she younger than me, but she's a girl, too! I could be a commander if I wanted to be one! Yep, I could totally do it. Well, probably. I think I could.

As a result, the night before he departed for High Britannia, Bastian had "borrowed" a weapon from the treasury. Naturally, the palace noticed it was missing as soon as the following morning, which sent the court into complete turmoil. The only reason it hadn't become a larger incident was because the emperor, in an attempt to save his son's neck, had assured them that he had loaned Bastian the blade.

I can't just show up to school carrying some massive sword. This one should be the most convenient for where I'm going.

And so, Bastian had ended up taking the dagger. The blade, which

was resting in an exquisitely designed scabbard, extended straight from its base to its tip, drawing a long and slender triangle. It was approximately 4 palms (30 cm) long, said to have been made to the exact length of the first emperor's foot.

This was the *Vite Espace Trois* (The Emperor's Nimble Steps III). Its double-edged blade was as thin and light as paper, and legend had it that the weapon could be swung so fast it severed sound itself.

Bastian held the regalia he had just pulled out in his right hand, and immediately felt something surge through him. And then, something peculiar happened—he could have sworn he was running even faster than usual. He was right before the enemy's eyes in the span of a single breath, surprising even himself.

"Don't point a gun at your own princess, you stupid soldiers!" he shouted.

Before the first soldier could even aim his gun, a blade sliced clean through his arm. It didn't make a sound as it tore through the wind, just as effortlessly cleaving another man's arm as the dagger was pulled back. It was only when it was partway through severing a third soldier that blood began to violently spurt from the first man's shoulder, shortly followed by an agonized scream.

"GAAAAAAH!?"

The three soldiers' guns dropped to the ground. Bastian immediately scooped one up, firing into the crowd of soldiers standing behind them without hesitation.

"Did you see that!?" he yelled, "Fall back now unless you want to die!"

This was High Britannia's latest gun model. Reloading was fast and easy, and each round packed a considerable punch. But it was a single-shot, front-loaded model that needed to be reloaded after each shot, so as soon as he had pulled the trigger, Bastian threw the gun aside. Before it had even touched the ground, however, he kicked another fallen gun into his hand and fired again. And so he continued this process, slicing through foes, snatching their loaded guns, and then finishing them off with a single bullet. The only soldiers he didn't aim at were those who had turned to flee.

These are incredible. It might be in part because I'm shooting point-blank, but they easily pierce through even the thickest parts of iron armor. It's a shame these soldiers are all so weak.

"Hm?"

Just then, a figure stepped out from the end of the alley, blocking Bastian from continuing forward. It was at that moment that Elize finally caught up.

"Hah... Hah... Bas— Ah...!"

Elize stopped herself short of saying his name, noticing the enemy

ahead. By the look of it, the person blocking their path was a woman; she had short black hair, her lips were tightly sealed, and there was a sharp look in her eyes. She was wearing the uniform of an officer beneath what appeared to be light armor, a longsword and a pistol dangling from her hip. She presumably had a dagger beneath the cloth covering her legs, too.

The woman let the rifle slung across her shoulder fall to the ground. They were ten paces apart; in the time it would have taken her to load a round, Bastian's dagger would have already made contact. The fact that she had chosen to drop her gun meant she was skilled enough to have realized that.

Bastian's lips curled into a smile. For some reason, he almost wanted to chuckle. "What's this? So there is a half-decent fighter here."

"I am First Lieutenant Glenda Graham of the High Britannian Army, First Division. Who are you?"

A shiver raced down Bastian's spine. He pushed up his sunglasses.

"Bahaha... 'Tis not a name worth giving. You may call me the emissary of darkness, Chevalier Sombre! Now savor the taste of the darkness that dwells in this right arm!"

"Hm. A Belgarian name."

"Ah! Wait, err... The Dark Knight! That was what I meant to say! You may call me the Dark Knight."

Glenda drew her longsword. An ordinary weapon would easily shatter when struck by one of the emperor's legendary blades, but judging by its silvery-white glimmer, this was no ordinary weapon—there was no doubting that this woman was holding a blade made of that new ore being produced in High Britannia.

"A foreigner nonetheless. Are you doing this for money? You'll regret it."

Without giving him a chance to answer, she rushed straight at him.

C'mon, how could I let her take the initiative? Did I lose my nerve because I finally found someone who might actually be able to put up a fight? You've gotta be kidding me.

Bastian tutted. "Ah, I'm such a bloody fool! When you see an enemy, you're supposed to attack right away!"

As Glenda closed the distance at top speed, Bastian stepped in to meet her.

"What!?"

"Ouraaaaaah!"

He thrust out the *Vite Espace Trois*. Glenda was able to parry the first strike, but the next one followed too quickly for her to react; he had slashed three times in practically the same instant. Sparks flew,

and the ear-grating screech of metal on metal pierced the air. The moment their blades parted, Glenda's bracer tore open.

"Gnn!? My new-alloy armor!"

"You're wearing armor there, too!?" No wonder his dagger hadn't sunk as deep as he had expected.

Glenda swiped her sword, forcing Bastian to step back. Was she trying to create some distance between them?

"Think again!" he roared, once again stepping in to meet her. He caught her next slash with his dagger. It let out a metallic wail shriller than anything Bastian had ever heard before as she glided her sword's edge over his dagger, its tip extending straight toward his face. He sidestepped this while moving in even further. They were now so close that their foreheads were almost touching, their eyes—and their weapons—locked.

Bastian clenched his left fist until it began to let out a jarring sound. *Make a fist harder than stone and then... slam it in!*

Glenda took the attack with her arm, but Bastian had enough brute strength to pick up a cow; her body was knocked up into the air.

"Wh— How!?"

"Go to sleep!"

Now that she was unable to brace her legs, Bastian launched a kick toward her abdomen. She managed to block using both arms, but the sudden impact was like she had been hit by a speeding carriage. She was thrown back-first into a brick wall. It crumbled around her, raising a huge, dense cloud of dust.

Glenda was no longer visible. Was she getting back up? There was no time to wait, or to settle their fight.

"We're going, Elize!"

"Ah... Okay!"

And so Bastian and Elize successfully made their escape from the city of Applewood.

Chapter 3: Reaching Greybridge

The evening of April 16th—

The westering sun shone through the large, west-facing window in one of Margaret's thirteen private rooms. Tea and sweets had been placed on the table, and the maids in attendance were standing by the wall, obediently awaiting their next order.

Their master was currently sprawled out across the sofa as large as a bed, having stripped away her silk dress to bare her chest and thighs. As she was gradually enveloped by the light from the setting sun, her entire body was wrapped in hues of such a deep red that it appeared as though her skin had been set ablaze—or perhaps more appropriately, bathed in blood. Even her black hair and amber eyes were now a vivid crimson.

“Have they written anything interesting?”

“Unfortunately, there is not a single report that would entertain someone with such refined tastes as Princess Margaret.” Oswald reverently bowed his head, holding the reports behind himself.

Margaret languidly curled her pointer finger, beckoning over a maid carrying a basket full of roses, all the while keeping her gaze on Oswald. “So have they found Liz yet?”

“...My deepest apologies. She was sighted in Applewood, but the princess has eluded us.”

“My oh my... It seems my dear Lizzy is a lot more nimble than the last time I saw her. Or have you simply lost your motivation? Could it be that you don't really want to capture her?”

“Not at all.”

“I don't hate kind men.”

“This petty officer lives solely to exterminate anyone who stands in the way of the one and only Princess Margaret. It is wholly impossible for me to feel compassion for Princess Elizabeth.”

“Oh, that's a shame. I, for one, do pity Liz. That's why I must pick out roses for her.”

All of the flowers in the basket that the maid was holding out had turned a bright red under the evening sun; it was impossible to make out the finer differences between them. Why had she purposely chosen this room, at this hour, to choose roses? That was surely something that only Margaret knew, and Oswald had no intention of asking her to explain. He would not question. He would not hesitate.

“The incident occurred early this morning. The soldiers spotted a girl whom they presumed to be Elizabeth in the city of Applewood, but were immediately taken down by a boy who appeared to be accompanying her.”

“Looks like not everything goes as planned. If this were a play, she would have been captured so easily. Then Liz and I would meet—such close cousins, now turned enemies. In a play, our dialogue would be the real climax—the two leading actresses, finally together in one scene. I’m sure it would be a vibrant display, one that everyone would cheer for.”

“It is as you say.”

“But... this is not a play. How unfortunate. Incidentally, didn’t Glenda go to Applewood?”

“You are most correct. The first lieutenant participated in battle... but was overwhelmed by the boy in question, and has sustained injuries as a result.”

“Oh dear, that’s a disappointment.”

This boy was clearly a master of his craft. Glenda could be counted among High Britannia’s ten most skilled soldiers; to think he had been able to overpower her one-on-one. What’s more, he had bested her using only a dagger.

Who could he be? Oswald pondered.

According to the report, there was a high chance that the boy came from the Belgarian Empire. It was true that the imperial army was known for its strength, but there couldn’t be too many people out there stronger than Glenda. After all, Oswald had taken great care to gather intel for this upcoming war. The newest firearms and cannons; armor, swords and lances made from High Britannia’s newly developed alloy—he would be able to lead their great nation to victory through this superiority in equipment. That was what Oswald had determined. He had gone out of his way to sell these newest weapons to various neighboring countries such as Varden, not only for the funds, but to confirm their applicability in real combat. The results had come back favorably.

That was precisely why it was so urgent that he look into who this boy could be. He needed to know who was protecting Princess Elizabeth.

Margaret narrowed her eyes at the scent of the rose in her hand. “How troublesome... It’s just disappointment after disappointment, failure after failure. Nothing’s going well at all.” She paused for a second. “How wonderful. I can’t wait.”

“...This petty officer cannot bear the shame of causing such worry to the compassionate Princess Margaret. But I beg of you, please allow me a little more time.”

“Do you think Liz will make it to the palace?”

“That would be impossible. I have placed not only Applewood, but every station and train carriage under strict surveillance.” As far as the public was aware, it was a precaution to prevent any traitors from using the death of the Queen to cause a commotion. “It is only 100 miles (160 km) from the palace to Applewood, but there are thick forests and high mountains between us. A carriage on the highway would take five days at least, plus they would have to undergo inspections at every important checkpoint. She will never reach us in time.”

“And to walk that distance would be so very tiring.”

“Correct.”

Oswald knew that, by foot, it would be impossible for Princess Elizabeth to reach the palace in seven days. An unexpected boy had entered the fray, but thanks to the early death of Queen Charlotte, Oswald’s plan had only been further solidified. Furthermore, Glenda’s injuries were reportedly light ones; he would summon her back, give her knights to lead, and then send her after the princess once more. The boy may have been untouchable, but she was the only one they needed to assassinate.

Margaret brought the rose to her lips, then touched the tip of her tongue to its petals. “So Liz won’t be coming to the palace. I thought we would finally meet after so long.”

“This encounter will have to wait until after the great Princess Margaret is crowned... at the state funeral.”

Queen Charlotte’s state funeral would be held on the last of the Seven Days of Silence, with the new queen then being crowned at the Daybreak Declaration the following day; for Oswald to suggest the encounter would take place after Margaret had already been crowned meant it likely wasn’t Queen Charlotte’s funeral he was referring to.

As Oswald bowed, Margaret held out the rose she had brought to her lips. “You can have it.”

“...This is... too great of an honor for me.” A present from a lady could not be accepted with one hand; Oswald placed his reports on the floor, fell to one knee, and held out both hands together. The rose was placed gently on his palms.

Margaret’s gaze moved to the reports on the floor. “Fufufu... So they failed to capture Liz, did they?”

“So say the reports.”

“And those who fail must be punished. What do you think?”

“As you wish.”

“Then off with their heads.”

“...The death penalty, is it?”

“Fufufu... Correct. Off with their heads.”

“I admire the judgment of our wise Princess Margaret. The High Britannian Army shall go to war in but a few days’ time—should we neglect to punish those who were overpowered by but a single boy, victory shall never be obtained, no matter how superior our equipment may be. The one responsible shall atone with their life, while the rest shall receive a reprimand.”

“Right. That sounds splendid.” Margaret pulled another rose out of the maid’s basket, plucking its petals one by one and dropping them into the tea cup on the table. Red rose petals, red tea. Then, a look of pure delight on her face, she downed the blood-red liquid, still lounging under the crimson light of the westering sun.



Noon on April 16th—

Having slipped out of Applewood, Bastian and Elize proceeded through the forest that ran alongside the road. At their current pace, they would not reach the palace by the morning of the 23rd; their only feasible option was to travel at least partway by carriage.

Bastian and Elize took a quick break, resting under the shade of a tree. They were only a few trees deep from the road; if a carriage came along, the plan was to walk out and attempt to negotiate. If soldiers came by, they would instead keep low.

Bastian was able to make full use of his heightened sense of hearing in the forest, so much so that he actually considered the forest much less dangerous than the city. As he gazed at the map Elize had scratched into the dirt, he let out a sigh. “That’s far. We need a carriage... but there’ll be soldiers at any town we stop at.”

Elize nodded in agreement. “The large cities are dangerous.”

“Guess we should just get off whenever we’re getting close to a place like that. But will avoiding the roads even be an option once we start nearing the palace?”

“...That’s a good question.” As she stared at the roughly drawn map, Elize began to look increasingly conflicted. Bastian would protect her—she knew that resolve hadn’t wavered—but it would be especially dangerous if soldiers managed to surround them in an open space. No matter how fast he could move, it would be impossible to avoid attacks from all directions.

So how do we get to the palace?

Elize looked over the map, then pointed to an isolated area southeast of the castle. “I think we should head here.”

“Something there?”

“There’s a place called Fort Greybridge. The commander there, Bruno Carlo, is my father’s younger brother—in other words, my uncle.”

“I see... But there’s no guarantee you can trust him just because he’s family. Back home, my own brother is out poisoning our siblings and sending them off to the front lines.”

“Which is why the third son fled overseas?”

“Pretty much.”

“What a troublesome *count house* you come from.”

Whoops. Bastian clapped a hand over his mouth. *But does it really matter at this point...?* He had half a mind to just throw caution to the wind. Elize was clever and clearly well read in contemporary Belgian history; she almost certainly knew by now. But there was something far more important to address:

“Can we really trust him? He’s a military man.”

“That is because of his lineage. As the second son, Bruno Carlo joined the army in place of his older brother, my father... who instead married my princess mother and became a diplomat.”

“I see.”

International relations between two countries could change entirely based on something as seemingly small as the status of the person sent to negotiate. For this reason, those connected to royalty were expected to perform more in diplomacy than in the military. Perhaps someday in the future, the Empire would push a similar role onto Bastian.

“I wouldn’t want to be a diplomat,” he sighed.

“Really? You’d probably manage quite well; I have to say, your Britannian isn’t half bad.”

“Don’t sound so surprised. I’m the man who’ll write a masterpiece!”

“Ah, yes. Your Britannian is passable, but that may be a rather ambitious goal with your questionable level of Belgian.”

“N-Not true at all. I’m already so close. I just need one more push. Maybe two.”

“I can’t do much, but I am supporting you.” Elize smiled.

Bastian bashfully scratched his head before Elize pulled the conversation back on topic.

“My uncle is so overflowing with love for his country that Her Majesty Queen Charlotte proclaimed she would have recommended him for the royal guard had he been ten years younger. What’s more, though he’s a soldier, the man is a genuine pacifist. It’s a one-day trip from his fort to the palace; if we can have his unit guard us, we should make it in time.”

Bastian thought for a moment. There was no doubt that it would

be tough for him to escort her all the way to the palace on his own. If there was someone influential near the palace whom they could rely on, then entrusting her safety to their unit would be the wisest move.

"I can't think of anything else... Let's pray this uncle of yours is reliable."

"He's already fifty, but he's robust and strong of heart. I'm sure he'll help us."

"Got it. If you're so sure, we'll head to the fort."

Their discussion over, Bastian and Elize chewed on some aralia sprouts they had picked up while walking through the forest, waiting to see if any carriages would pass. The sprouts would normally be salted and boiled, but there was nothing preventing them from being eaten as is. Not that they tasted any good. As expected, Elize had never eaten aralia before, but Bastian had been taught how to forage by Eddie and his grandfather.

He was sure they would be able to reach the palace by hiking through the mountains, but they would have needed a few more days to work with. Luckily, the roads seemed to be a little busier than they had been that morning, and a canopied two-horse wagon passed by just as Bastian was beginning to get sick of waiting. A lone, bearded man was seated on the perch; his lack of guards either meant that the coachman wasn't carrying anything of value or that he was extremely confident in his own strength. Whichever it was, Bastian walked straight out into the middle of the road.

"Excuse me!"

"Wha—!? Whoa, whoa, whoa!"

Perhaps owing to the fact that the boy who had run over was wearing a school uniform, the driver warily came to a stop. Bastian lowered his head.

"I'm begging you here! We need to get to a fort called Greybridge! Please give us a lift!"

"Greybridge, y'say? If ya headin' that way, I'll be stoppin' at a town nearby," he said in a strong regional Britannian accent.

"Great!" Bastian clenched his fist in triumph. He wasn't very familiar with High Britannia's wider geography given that he had only seen a crude map drawn into the dirt, so it was lucky that they had been able to catch a carriage already headed in that general direction.

"Thank you very kindly." Elize lined up next to him and lowered her head.

The carriage driver stroked his rugged beard and furrowed his brow. "Why're ya lookin' for a wagon out 'ere anyway, eh? You could just as well've taken the coach from Applewood."

"Th-That's..." As Elize searched for the right words, Bastian stepped forward just enough that he could whisper in her ear.

“...Leave this to me. I’ve given it some thought this time.”

“...All yours.”

Bastian smacked his chest, then boldly turned to the cabman. “We are holy knights fighting against a congregation of darkness. An evil magician has blown us all the way out here, and this country shall be in grave danger unless we return to the fort at once. Good sir, please lend your assistance to our cause!”

“Gah!” Elize thrust him aside with all her might.

“Whoa!?” Bastian had been taken completely unaware, and dramatically flopped onto the ground.

The driver was now scrutinizing them both with palpable skepticism in his eyes. “...Yer ’oly... what now?”

Elize cleared her throat. “My apologies. This man tends to get a bit caught up in his own imagination, but he... he’s precious to me.” Elize blushed. “You see, ah... truth be told... we’re eloping!”

“Say wha—!?” The cry of surprise came from none other than Bastian himself as he tried to stand, only to be kicked hard in the knee. He writhed around in pain as Elize turned back to the carriage driver, red from ear to ear.

“H-He’s foolish and unresourceful—he doesn’t even have a good grasp of our situation—but... You see, he’s still a student, and I’m the daughter of a noble... and we’ve both fallen in l-l-l-lo—”

“You smitten?”

Elize timidly nodded. “We are, but... my father told me I would be marrying a count who has quite the temperament.”

“Hm... Been bleedin’ suspicious ’round ’ere these days. Soldiers’re up in arms, nobles all worked up fer some reason...”

“I have an uncle I can count on in Greybridge. Could you... Could you please take us!?” she desperately pleaded.

The man stroked his beard, a pensive expression on his face. Elize continued to look up at him, her gaze serious. The elopement was of course a complete lie, but her desperation was real; she was putting her life on the line, not for herself, but for her country. Bastian was in the same boat, and while he remained crouched on the ground, he looked up at the cabman as well.

One hand still on his beard, the man pointed behind him—back toward Applewood. “Go on.”

“O-Oh... Well, thank you anyway.”

“I’m sayin’ to ’op in the back. Just make sure you’re under the ’ood; bandits’ll give me a right headache if they see I’m transportin’ a noble lad and lass.”

“Th-Thank you so much!” Elize lowered her head in a show of appreciation. Bastian shared her gratitude, so much so that he was sure he had never been so thankful in his entire life.



That night, they camped out by the wagon. The driver's beard was too thick for Bastian and Elize to be able to tell his age, but he must have been carrying goods for quite some time as he was very well accustomed to traveling.

"An inn? Might as well just throw me coin away. Won't be makin' us a fire neither—you won't believe 'ow much work it is to light one every night. Best thing ya can do is go straight to sleep, that's what I say."

They all shared preserved foods for dinner, and while the cabman drank ale, Bastian and Elize were given the same water as the horses. It had simply been fetched from the river, but they were in no position to complain; he had even kindly lent them blankets to keep them warm in the cold weather they were so terribly unprepared for.

Bastian wrapped the stiff, starched cloth around himself as he lay at the base of a tree, Elize beside him under a blanket of her own. The cabman was asleep under the cover of his wagon.

"...The stars."

"What's wrong, Bastian?"

"There was this one day... The chamberlain completely snapped, so I ran away. I went into the mountains and just ran, and ran, and ran; I didn't even come home that night. I was just thinking that... the sky I saw that night was exactly like this one." As he spoke, Bastian gazed up through the gaps in the leaves, watching the stars that glimmered so brightly that he was sure he'd be able to reach out and grab them.

There was a light rustle of cloth as Elize changed her posture.

"...I've... never looked up at the night sky like this before."

"...That so?"

All of a sudden, Bastian had the urge to look at the girl to his side. Her face was illuminated by the gentle light of the moon; she looked absolutely sublime. He was caught in a trance, and a single word slipped from his mouth:

"...Beautiful."

"...Yes, they're so near yet so far. It's like they could fall right out of the sky."

"Yeah... sounds about right."

"Hm?" Elize looked over at Bastian, but he had already turned away out of embarrassment.

"We were talking about how beautiful the stars are. Now how about we get some sleep? We may have hitched a ride, but we'll still need to have our wits about us."

"Point taken."

It wasn't long before Bastian could hear Elize's slow, steady breathing as she fell into a deep slumber. But something kept him awake a little longer than usual that night.



On the evening of the 17th, it started to pour with rain. When it came time to sleep, the cabman moved some of his cargo out from under the canopy to make space for Bastian and Elize. That cargo got wet as a result, but he said he was more concerned about them catching a cold.

On the 18th, it rained the entire day. As they were moving to one side to let another carriage pass, one of their wheels slipped and pulled them off of the road. The other carriage had offered to tow them out, but Bastian simply picked the whole thing up and placed it back on track.

On the 19th, they were stopped by soldiers. Thankfully, Bastian had heard the clatter of armor well in advance, and so had been able to grab Elize and jump out of the wagon before they even came into sight. They then walked through the forest, circumventing the checkpoint. Just as the two thought they would have to find a new carriage, they found the bearded man waiting for them further down the road.

The 20th was sunny. So sunny, in fact, that it felt much too hot for spring. Fort Greybridge was halfway up a rocky mountain; it wasn't too steep to climb but was strewn with large stones up to waist-level that made the footing too poor for siege weapons or cavalry. From the base of that mountain extended a town. Two rivers carved through the rocky slope, and perhaps due to the past few days of rain, they were flowing strong with the boisterous babble of water.



The sun was nearing the horizon. Taking its light head-on, they dragged their growing shadows down the road from east to west. The sound of running water could be heard as soon as they left the forest. They had reached a town. A large stone bridge stretched across to its entrance, and while it was considerably old, its sturdy appearance was enough to impart a sense of security.

The bearded driver pointed to it. "That there bridge is what got tha town its name."

"I see, so that's why it's called Greybridge... Hm, I can use that."

Just as Bastian was thinking up a new special move, Elize shot him a scornful glance.

“You’re caught up in something strange again, aren’t you?”

“When you’re working on a masterpiece, you’ve always gotta be looking out for new ideas.”

“I know we’re not on the road to the capital just yet, but please do stay focused on our safety.”

“Just leave it to me—I’ll protect you.”

“Ah... Um... N-Not what I meant. If you get injured then we’re done for. That’s why it’s so important that you look after yourself.”

“Mn? Yeah, sure.” Bastian rarely ever worried about himself; while he had done his fair share of reckless deeds, he never bore any lasting damage.

The wheels let off a gentle, rhythmic rattle as the carriage crossed the bridge. Bastian took a look around from the shadow of the canopy. There were some people in armor, but he could discern from their appearance that they were mercenaries. He couldn’t see any regular soldiers from the High Britannian Army, so it seemed they hadn’t pursued them this far.

The town of Greybridge was somewhat of a mess. A number of narrow paths spread out at random from the central square, and there was nothing that could be called a main street. A black flag had been raised to signify mourning—proof that the Seven Days of Silence had begun.

Apparently, most stores in the royal capital would be closed, but a more provincial city did not exercise such self-discipline. A chaotic jumble of stalls had been opened along the narrow streets, and those shopping carefully avoided one another as they browsed.

“This place is kinda like a rubbish heap.”

“You’re being rude, Bastian.”

“Didn’t used ta be a fmg out ’ere before the civil war ’appened an’ the fort was put up. Then traders all started comin’ in, and whenever people start gatherin’ together they’ll always set up a market and a town or two. That’s why the place is a mess—there was absolutely no plannin’ done.”

“Hm...” Elize made a small noise to interject. “The town is sandwiched between two rivers from which beautiful stones can be picked up, so I hear they’ve carved out a niche by making ornaments from precious metals.”

“Yeah, Greybridge accessories’re all the rage.”

“That so?” Whenever Bastian had attended parties in the imperial court, he would hear noble girls talking about accessories—perhaps this town’s name had even come up in their conversations, but he had never paid enough attention to say for sure. When he heard of how

the town came to be, what had just moments ago looked like a jumbled mess now began to seem strangely appealing. It was a most peculiar phenomenon.

The cabman stopped his carriage at the edge of the town square. "An' 'ere we are."

Now that he thought about it, Bastian was sure this was the first time he had seen the man smile. He and Elize stepped down from the wagon, giving their sincerest thanks once again.

"We couldn't have made it here without your help, good sir. Thank you."

"Yeah, thanks mister!"

"Nah, don't worry 'bout it. I'm just hopin' you two lovebirds 'ave a future ahead of ya... Take care, okay?"

"Ah, yes..." Elize looked pained by the fact that the story they had given him had all been made up. She looked like she wanted to say something, but Bastian held up a hand to stop her before she could.

With a flick of the reins, the carriage they had been in the care of for the past five days was off. The sound of its wheels grew fainter and fainter until it had fully melded with the noises of the town, and its figure disappeared into the shadows of the brick buildings.

"No need to get him involved," he reminded her.

"Yes. I know."

They looked up at the fort on the mountainside. It looked just as old as the bridge, and somehow even sturdier. It was a considerable distance from the town at the mountain's base. *If I was going to attack, where would I start?* Bastian inadvertently ended up thinking, before dismissing the thought with a shake of his head.

He groped around for his pocket watch. "You think we'll get there before dinner?"

"If you're hungry, we should find somewhere to eat in town first."

"We don't have the money. What are you gonna barter off now that your handkerchief's gone? Don't tell me you're gonna pawn off your skirt."

"Don't say something so shameless, Bastian."

"I'm only joking. Mn? Huh?"

"What's wrong?"

"No... My pocket watch... It's missing..."

"Eh!?"

No matter how much Bastian searched, he couldn't find the old pocket watch that he had brought from Belgaria. He sighed. It had definitely been in his possession when they left Applewood, and they hadn't stopped by any towns these past few days. He hadn't needed to perform any crazy feats of dexterity, either—in fact, they had barely even met anyone.

Elize's expression sank.

Bastian cocked his head as he produced a pair of sunglasses from his breast pocket and put them on. Then, he started to laugh. "Hahaha, now I've gone and done it. I must have dropped it somewhere."

"Err..."

"What's wrong?"

Elize's concerned face shifted into a gentle smile. "Nothing. That part of you is just—"

"Now then! How about we get going? Feels like forever since we last had a hot meal."

"Fufu... Very well."

She silently placed her hand in Bastian's outstretched palm, and the two of them set off for the mountain path to Fort Greybridge.



The night of April 19th, the day before Bastian and Elize arrived at Fort Greybridge—

"Pardon me." Glenda entered with a bow, a white medical cloth wrapped around her head.

She had just stepped into Oswald's office in the palace. Books and documents lined the entire face of one wall, and a single large office desk occupied a space near the back. A conference table used for drafting up plans was placed smack-dab in the center of the room, over which he had laid two maps: one showing High Britannia and its neighboring countries, and the other showing the area around the palace. Oswald was standing at attention beside this table, on top of which a girl wearing a dress had taken a seat.

It was Princess Margaret.

There was no sofa in the room, but there was a leather chair by the desk; why she had chosen to rest her bottom not only on the hard conference table, but on top of both maps, was a mystery.

Despite this being an office, Margaret's maids were standing at the ready along the wall, this time dressed in normal maid uniforms. They all glanced over at the armor-clad visitor; she was a woman all the same, but carried a completely different air about her. For one, Glenda was still wearing her light armor despite being in the palace.

She gave the same model salute as always. "First Lieutenant Glenda Graham. I have made my return."

"Splendid work on your recovery."

And as per usual, Oswald spoke to his subordinate in a cordial tone. Margaret shot him a delighted glance. She was short in stature

and sitting down, but being atop the table meant her eyes were level with his.

“My oh my. What could this mean? ...Hey, Oswald?”

“Whatever could be the problem, O Refined Princess Margaret?”

“Glenda is here.”

“This petty officer has called her back from the front in Applewood to give her new orders.”

“Fufufu... Did I not say that those who failed should be put to death? This is strange. So very strange. What could it all mean?”

Margaret seemed absolutely exuberant. She was used to everything always going her way, which was why she found it so amusing when fate turned against her. To have it all as she wished was so, so boring that she was constantly craving some form of stimulation.

She focused on Glenda, her glistening amber eyes reflecting the warm glow of a nearby gas lamp. They were beautiful... but that very fact made them equally as terrifying.

Glenda could easily place among the top ten strongest in High Britannia; she was a daring, valorous knight, but even she couldn't hide how nervous she was.

Why was she so anxious? Margaret was just a princess—she had absolutely no authority over High Britannia's army or its people, and even if she became queen, she did not have the right to punish someone based on her own arbitrary judgment. Parliament's approval was needed for any of her orders to be carried out, and if over twenty-four of its thirty members were against them, the queen's orders were refused.

Or at least, that was the official stance, but Margaret was special—if she gave an order, it would be made into a reality. Oswald, for example, was only a colonel; above him were the ranks of brigadier general, lieutenant general, and general, and within the palace he was but a single strategy officer. However, his authority stretched over the entirety of the High Britannian Army.

Margaret's eyes were fixed on Glenda, and there was a discomfiting intensity to her gaze. Glenda was hoping Oswald would say something, but her loquacious superior officer stayed silent for once. She gulped, then bowed her head low.

“M-My humblest apologies!”

“What might you be apologizing for? The fact that you let Liz get away in Applewood, the fact that you still haven't found her, or the fact that you're still alive?”

“E-Erk...”

“That's no good, Glenda. You have such a scary look on your face. Smile some more, it'll make you look much cuter.”

“Kh... I am apologizing for the fact that I was overpowered by the boy accompanying Princess Elizabeth.”

“Oho, I don’t care about that. Just hurry and let me see Liz.”

“...Understood, ma’am.”

At that, Oswald finally stepped into the conversation:

“O Gentle Princess Margaret, if you will allow me to report on those you sentenced to death...”

“Fufu... I’ll allow it. Even if they are the words of poor Oswald, who values his subordinates over yours truly.”

“Perish the thought. Your order to have the one responsible pay with their life and the others given a harsh reprimand was most definitely carried out.”

“Dear me, this is strange then. Has she come back to haunt us?”

“Given Princess Margaret’s extensive knowledge, she must surely be aware already... but if I were to state the obvious, Glenda is not the commander of Applewood. She is a first lieutenant, and the on-site commander is—*was*—a lieutenant colonel.”

Margaret nodded. She seemed to be enjoying this quite a bit. “You’ve evaded me yet again. What a pity... I was so looking forward to seeing the troubled look on your face... but my efforts were in vain.”

“This petty officer is no more than a pebble by the wayside—not someone great enough to deserve the great Princess Margaret’s interest.”

Margaret shrugged and called over one of the maids by the wall, who approached holding a teacup on a tray. Meanwhile, Oswald cut back to the matter at hand.

“Lieutenant, based on what you know from the reports from the soldiers, Princess Elizabeth has not taken a straight path from Applewood to the capital. Is that correct?”

“Yes, sir!” Glenda straightened her back and nodded, her usual dignified air having returned. “Princess Elizabeth must be aware that she needs to arrive before the 23rd. If she has not taken the train, then she can only be riding by carriage. This limits the routes she can take.”

She beckoned for a map, and for a brief moment Oswald’s eyes flitted to the conference table. Princess Margaret was still sitting there, elegantly drinking her tea, and the maps were under her buttocks. Oswald picked up where Glenda had left off as though nothing had happened.

“...Her options are limited, and if she wishes to break through the royal palace’s security, having a single boy as a guard will not be enough.”

Glenda silently listened, standing at attention. Margaret seemed

preoccupied, complaining that her tea was lukewarm to her maid, who was offering her most earnest apology. But just when Glenda thought the princess was staying out of it, she suddenly piped up.

“Hey, Oswald?”

“What could it be?” Abrupt as it was, he answered without the slightest delay.

“Where did Liz go?”

Oswald glanced down at the map that was now creasing under Margaret’s bottom. “By this petty officer’s conjecture... she is probably headed for Fort Greybridge.”

Soldier eyewitness accounts, Elizabeth’s personal connections, geographical factors... Taking them all into account, there really was no other option.

Under normal circumstances, she would give up on returning to the palace and flee—perhaps she would be able to rely on the boy accompanying her to help her defect to Belgaria. But that wasn’t in her character. After narrowly escaping death, she still dared to appear at Applewood that very same day.

“Fort Greybridge.”

“That is correct.”

“Fufufu... Is that around here?” Margaret asked as she indecently opened her legs, pulling up her skirt to such an extent that she came dangerously close to exposing what was underneath.

Glenda flinched, but Oswald remained unmoved. Between the princess’s white thighs was the map of the area around Queenstower.

Margaret’s upturned eyes curiously watched Oswald’s expression. “Fufufufu... Now, where is Greybridge?”

“To answer the noble Princess Margaret, Greybridge is right here.”

With no hesitation at all, Oswald placed his right index finger on a point on the map. His hand was so close to her that he could feel her body heat; it was almost as if he had stuck a hand directly up her skirt.

“Mn... I see. It’s surprisingly close,” Margaret remarked, a nasally tint to her voice.

“While the steam train does not stop there, it is only a day’s journey by coach. Though it would take more than five days on foot.”

“And that’s where... you’re sending Glenda, is it?”

“Indeed, it is. I will send the riflemen with her—they should certainly be able to capture Princess Elizabeth.”

“Certainly, you say?”

“It is inconceivable to cause the magnanimous Princess Margaret any further anxiety or disappointment. Please wait patiently with peace of mind.”

“Fufufu... Not a chance.”

“—!!”

For a moment, Oswald was at a loss for words. Margaret reached out and held his cheeks in both hands, her lips curling into a heated smile.

“I’m going to Greybridge too. I’ve grown tired of waiting.”

“...Understood. All is as you command.”

As her fingers were still resting on his face, Oswald could not move a muscle. Unable to lower his head in reverence, he could only respond in words.

And just like that, Margaret removed her hands. She swung her leg round as though performing some kind of showy roundhouse kick before leaping down from the table, her skirt streaming behind her. She usually just lazed around, even leaving an action as small as bringing her teacup to her lips to her maids, and yet... when she moved, she was almost like a feral cat: supple yet graceful.

“Very well, Liz. How wonderful. It’s all thanks to you that I’m having such fun. Now, what shall I do? What shall I do to you? Which dress should I pick? What shoes shall I wear? I wouldn’t dare to appear before you wearing anything embarrassing; you deserve better than that.”

And with that, Margaret exited the room, leading her maids along behind her. The office’s usual air of silence and order had finally returned.

Oswald touched a finger to his brow and sighed. He looked over at Glenda; she had gone a bright red and was frozen in place. In terms of age, she would be older than the princess, but... honestly, it was just cruel to compare them.

“Well then, give this to the riflemen... and this to Princess Margaret’s guard,” he said, handing over the decrees he had prepared in advance.

“Eh!?” Glenda’s eyes opened wide. “Don’t tell me you even anticipated Her Majesty’s flight of fancy!” Her tone was insolent, but Oswald did not scorn her for it. He simply shrugged.

“It is foolish not to carry an umbrella when you know it might rain.”

Chapter 4: Tower Ablaze

Bastian and Elize reached Fort Greybridge before the dark had completely set in. It had been about a two-hour climb from the town at the base of the mountain.

What will we do if they turn us away at the gate? The possibility had been playing on their minds, but luckily the gatekeeper knew Elize's face; the commander was her uncle and she had come a few times before, so the two were allowed to enter. The gatekeeper guiding them welcomed their visit and offered his condolences on the passing of the queen as he led them through the stone corridors.

Fort Greybridge was built on a south-facing slope. There was a mountain behind it, a downhill slope ahead, and a river on either side. The water's current had worn away the stone face around the fort, forming chasms just deep enough that surviving the fall would be a matter of chance. The only way to cross safely was by using one of a number of stone bridges that had been constructed over the chasms.

In short, whether the enemy opted to climb the slope, or cross the bridges to attack from the sides, the terrain was perfect to snipe them down. And as for the mountain behind, it reached so high that its summit was covered in a layer of snow; there would be many hardships involved in trying to traverse it. That said, it wasn't as if an attacker would need to climb to the summit, so it was most likely manageable... but given how large the fort was, there were probably between ten to fifteen hundred troops stationed inside. Bastian found it hard to believe it was important enough to go through such trouble to conquer.

Having noticed him nervously glancing around, Elize walked up beside him. "Is a fort really such a rare sight, Bastian?"

"Oh, mountain forts are a dime a dozen."

"Then is something else bothering you?"

"Nah. When you see a fort or castle, your mind just tends to wander, and you start thinking about how you'd capture it, right?"

"...No normal person thinks that way."

"I-I see."

One half of the fort—namely the section being used by soldiers—seemed to be composed of a cave-like district carved into the mountainside, while the other was composed of towers of stacked brick.

In Belgian forts, it was common to use towers as lookout posts, but there was usually only one. Fort Greybridge had four. In Bastian's opinion, High Britannian castles and forts contained an overabundance of excessively high towers—he had heard that the royal palace was simply riddled with them too. Was there some sort of reason for all this?

As he wondered this, they were led to one of the four towers and guided to around its midsection.

They were brought to a rather frugal-looking room. Inside, an aged man was seated on an unornamented wooden chair at an equally plain desk. He stood as they entered, a rather conflicted smile on his face.

"I'm glad you're safe... Elizabeth."

"Uncle!" Elize rushed toward him, overcome with emotion.

The man took her by the hands. "You did well to make it all the way here," he said, almost squeezing the words from his chest.

Bruno Carlo Victoria would turn fifty-one this year. For someone who was both a lieutenant colonel and a marquis, his clothing was quite plain—he wasn't even wearing any decorations over his pitch-black cotton robe. It was clear that these were his mourning robes, but Bastian couldn't help but think they made him look a bit like a priest.

Elize, meanwhile, was so relieved that there were tears welling in her eyes. Bruno Carlo must have been considerably worried for her, as he looked like he was about to cry himself.

For some reason, this contagion reached Bastian, and he found himself very nearly shedding tears as well. "Snff... Well, that's one bridge crossed."

"It's all thanks to you."

"Nah, you worked hard, Elize. I just helped where I could."

"Even if that is true, if you weren't there, Bastian, I—"

"I get it. Well then, once we reach the palace, you'd better read my masterpiece and offer me some proper feedback!"

"Fufu... Why of course." As she wiped away her tears, a gentle smile touched Elize's lips.

Bruno Carlo held his right hand out to Bastian, who returned the handshake. This man had an impressively strong grip; it was hard to believe he was fifty. This was a hand that had been strengthened by regular training.

"I don't know how I can express my gratitude but... thank you for saving Elize. There's so much more I must say to you, but I can't find the words."

"I'm not too used to being thanked. Well, we're not at the palace yet. The way I see it, the real battle starts here."

“You’re right... Very right indeed... And in regard to that... I need to speak with you for a moment.”

“Hm?”

“It’s an important talk.”

“Got it.” Bastian nodded, releasing the man’s handshake.

Bruno Carlo looked toward Elize. “Elizabeth, could you go to the dining hall ahead of us? The soldiers will guide you there. I need to talk with young Bastian here.”

Elize started to look anxious.

“It’ll be fine, go on,” Bastian said, urging her to leave. Honestly, whatever this talk was about, he just wanted to finish it quickly so that he could eat.

Elize opened the door to leave. “See you later, Bastian.”

“Yeah.”

And then, she left. She had seemed so reluctant to go, and he had given such a blunt response.

“So what did you want to tell me?”

“You’re from the Belgarian Empire, aren’t you?” Bruno Carlo asked without so much as a preface.

Bastian scratched his head. “...Is it really that obvious?”

He was wearing his sunglasses, but the name “Bastian” was a Belgarian one, and his Britannian pronunciation surely had some trace of a Belgarian accent that he couldn’t remedy. The two languages seemed similar, but were considerably different; he had picked up what he could—it would be terribly embarrassing to come across anyone he couldn’t understand—but had never quite mastered his pronunciation.

“You’re already famous in the military. Word hasn’t spread to the general public, but the soldiers know about you.”

“Yeah, that doesn’t surprise me...” After all, he had gotten into a less-than-discreet fight with that female knight called Glenda.

Bruno Carlo shook his head, his expression dubious. “I do, of course, intend to offer you a warm welcome and entertain you as Elizabeth’s dear friend. But I wonder what the soldiers will think?”

“Who cares?”

“The country is astir with talk of war. They all think that going to war will better their lives; the economy’s going nowhere, everyone’s trapped in the same financial state, and they reckon this’ll make it all go away.”

“I mean, yeah, no one willingly goes to war thinking it’ll make their life worse... But hey, you never really know until it’s all said and done.”

“I’m against us going to war.”

“Thank God you are. Seriously.”

Had Bruno Carlo had a sudden change of heart about the war, Bastian and Elize would have been in huge trouble, so hearing him confirm his beliefs was incredibly important.

"I would often express my beliefs to Princess Charlotte. Say there's a village where everyone is always fighting and one where—"

"Yeah, I heard that one from Elize. So she stole it from you, did she?"

"It is a tale commonly told among this country's pacifists."

"I understand the gist of it, don't worry. The Belgarian Empire is always warring it up, but I don't particularly think we're better off going to war."

Though Latrielle did seem to think war was necessary for the Empire.

"Whatever the case," Bruno Carlo said, his voice mixed with a sigh, "support for war is growing among both the soldiers and the people. As Elizabeth is a pacifist, they will naturally be against her."

"Naturally."

That was why trained knights had been sent to the school to escort her to the capital. Bastian still didn't know much about this Margaret girl's faction, but those knights had been attacked by soldiers of the High Britannian Army... and killed. Elize had nearly died herself.

Because she had promised to read his book, Bastian had given chase to hand it over, luckily making it just in time to save her. Normally, after going through a near-death experience, one would be terrified of going ahead... but Elize never stopped striving to reach the palace. They had stayed at an inn in Applewood that night, only to learn that the queen had passed the very next day. He could remember how much Elize had cried.

It quickly became apparent that the soldiers were plotting to assassinate Elize. Bastian had broken through their encirclement and defeated a female knight called Glenda, and the pair escaped Applewood. It was then thanks to the help of a kind, bearded cabman that they were able to arrive at Fort Greybridge.

"But Elize will definitely, always stand against the war," Bastian continued.

"But won't the new queen's closest friend being a Belgarian who shares the name of a Belgarian prince rub national sentiment the wrong way?"

"Eh!?" That was something Bastian hadn't even considered.

"If people found out, they wouldn't see our new queen as a pacifist—they'd see her as someone who had sold out to Belgaria."

"What are you on about!? I just...!"

No, shouting at this man would get him nowhere—the issue was

how the people would take it when they learned Bastian and Elize were friends.

“I wouldn’t care if you were a mercenary. If you merely shared a journey together... so be it. But you’re Belgianian—to entertain you as her dear friend is a different matter entirely!”

Bastian faltered, unsure of what to say. He had been sure that everything would be tied up in a nice little bow so long as he could just get her to the palace, but who would have thought that his own presence would worsen the standing of the new Queen Elize?

“Elizabeth must not be associated with Belgaria. Parliament represents the people; even if Her Majesty Queen Charlotte did name her as her successor, there is a chance they will refute it.”

Bastian had no words. He hadn’t given the situation that much thought.

“I’m sure you treasure Elize,” Bruno Carlo remonstrated, “which is why you should understand what’s needed without me having to tell you.”

His voice was calm. This was neither an order nor a fixed decision—he was urging Bastian to come to his own conclusions, just like those blasted tutors in the imperial courts.

The wheels in Bastian’s head finally began to turn. “...So you’re telling me my presence would damage Elize’s standing? Then it’s clear what I need to do.”

Bruno Carlo waited patiently for his answer; he was in no hurry.

Bastian tested the waters some more. “If I’m gone, there’ll be no issue.”

Silence fell over the room. Neither side desired this, but it was for the best. Bastian pushed his slipping shades back up his nose using his fingertips, then turned away.

“I’m counting on you, Sir Bruno Carlo.”

“You’re not going to tell her?”

“Do you really want the soldiers to see High Britannia’s new queen in tears, clinging to a Belgianian, begging him not to go?”

“Certainly not.”

Perhaps she would see him off without making much fuss at all, but Bastian felt that would be just as heartrending. It was happening faster than he’d anticipated, but he’d known that they would need to part eventually, and as long as she reached the palace safely, there was no longer any part for Bastian to play.

“You could still write her a letter, you know.”

“Mn? Ah, yeah. In that case...”

He reached for the book fastened under his belt—the book he had written, and promised to give her—but his hand stopped short. If he handed over this book written in Belgianian...

She's a real earnest gal, so she'll definitely read it, but it'll be during the important period when she's only just become queen. That's the worst time for such things to come to light.

Bastian had fantasized time and again, deluding himself over the sort of major impact his book would have. But those fantasies were nothing compared to the pain he knew it would bring Elize. This one book could easily change everything—he could even imagine her being condemned for it by whatever this “Parliament” thing was.

But above all else, he couldn't bring himself to entrust his manuscript to Bruno Carlo. He was like a tight-laced teacher so Bastian trusted him not to peek, but as the book was being passed on to royalty, it would most likely end up being reviewed and censored before she received it.

There was a delicate psychology preserved in his book, and he wanted to show it to someone who could understand—someone who wouldn't reject it. After all, it was embarrassing. But he knew it wasn't an option to say that he'd just come and meet her again. Bastian frowned, and the hand he had raised to his chest fell limp.

“I... haven't got anything to give her.”

“I see. That's unfortunate. Then at the very least give me a verbal message I can pass on.”

“Hmph... A new darkness beckons this righteous knight to set off once more. A battle of endless death calls out to me.”

“A code?” Bruno Carlo nodded knowingly.

“...Sorry, just forget you heard that.”

Something about his words just didn't sit right. Did they really suit him when he had run away from his own motherland? Bastian didn't think so.

Bruno Carlo had said he would cover the travel expenses—offering far too much money—but Bastian had declined; that wasn't why he had tagged along. With one hand in the air, Bastian made his exit.

“But hey, it was fun while it lasted.”

“I'll let her know,” Bruno Carlo said with a grave expression.

As the door closed behind him, Bastian muttered two final words under his breath:

“...I'm sorry.”



She had been told to go ahead to the dining room, but Elize didn't have the motivation to eat alone. She was seated in a round room at a round table—even the chairs were round. Bastian did say he was hungry, so she had assumed he would be here soon enough, but... he hadn't shown up.

Elize had a terrible feeling about this; she tried to return to her uncle's room several times, but the soldiers were obstinately against it. "We're following the commander's orders," they told her, and once this process had repeated for the third time, she gave up.

While the situation did worry her, she knew that no matter what happened, Bastian would be fine. In fact, she wondered if she should be more worried about what crazy thing *he* might do.

A while passed, and the door swung open. Bruno Carlo was alone, and cleared the soldiers away by ordering them to go to a lower floor. The fluttering feeling in Elize's chest grew wilder and wilder.

"Um..."

"I'm sorry I kept you waiting, Elizabeth."

"...Err, Uncle?"

"If you're looking for young Bastian... he left with your best interests in mind. He said your time together was fun while it lasted."

Elize rushed to the door like a fired bullet. "That can't—!"

"Do *not* go after him!" The sudden bellow came like thunder, freezing Elize in place. "He did it out of kindness. You understand why, don't you, Elizabeth?"

"B-But..." She knew just how dangerous it was for her to be close to someone from Belgaria. She understood this, but the corners of her eyes grew heated nonetheless. "...To leave without even saying goodbye... He's terrible..."

"Will you let the soldiers see your tears? Will you render his consideration meaningless? Were you not going to succeed Charlotte's —?"

All of a sudden, Bruno Carlo was at a loss for words. Tears began to stream down his cheeks, catching Elize completely off guard.

"...I'm sorry," he said.

"Uncle?"

"Let's eat. You must have been through a lot. Eat well, then go and wipe down your body."

Elize understood that this was what she had to do, but her feelings wouldn't follow along. They refused to accept this parting.

"Come on, sit." He stood the round chair that she had knocked over upright again. Then, he placed his hands on her shoulders, guided her back to her seat, and put a spoon in her hand. It was like she was a child. "Can you eat? We soldiers are taught that eating and resting are a part of our duties. It should be the same for you."

"...That's... Yes."

But it felt like the spoon in her hand was made of lead—so heavy that it might fall out of her hand at any moment—and the stew she had been starving for only a moment ago now looked as appealing as mud.

Elize silently moved her lips, mouthing words that would never be spoken. "...Bastian, are you... really gone?"

There was a knock at the door.

Bastian!?

Elize clung to the impossible chance that he had returned, but the next moment was punctuated by an unfamiliar voice: "Commander, report!"

"Wait there." Bruno Carlo stood from his seat and opened the door himself. On the other side was a soldier standing at attention, who immediately saluted.

"My apologies for interrupting your meal, sir!"

"Princess Elizabeth is tired. If this is a military matter, I'll hear it in a separate room."

"Understood, sir!"

"I'll be right back."

And with that, Bruno Carlo exited the room. Elize was left alone.



Bastian made his way back down the mountain path to town. He had experienced a moment of calm during the sunset, but as the sky grew darker and darker, he found himself growing increasingly irritated.

"UOOOOOOOOH!!"

He suddenly cried out and started to sprint down the path, deliberately trying to sweat out his emotions. The next thing he knew, he was back in the town at the mountain's base, having apparently taken just ten minutes to run down the path that had taken him two hours to climb with Elize. The sun had sunk beyond the western mountain ridge, and the scenery that had once been tinged red by the sunset was now painted over by the black of night.

In this moment of dusk, Bastian haphazardly chose one of the disorderly roads and made his way down it. Stalls were set up on either side with seemingly no rhyme or reason, but the merchants running them were now beginning to pack up.

"Hey, mister! 'Ave a bite, why don'tcha?" a young street vendor cheerfully touted.

"Mn? Me?" Bastian glanced over. There was a brick fire pit by the side of the road, over which a number of skewered potatoes were roasting. Now that he thought about it, the scent of baked potato had been wafting about for a while now, but he just hadn't paid it any notice.

"Are you a student? Not too common 'round here! So, how 'bout it? Have a lively tater or two!"

"...Is there such a thing as a lively potato? Ah, and I've got no

money... Aah, well... Who cares anyway?" Bastian slipped off his sunglasses. "These enough to get me a tater?"

"Whoa! No way, sir... I could give you a whole day's worth of 'em, and it still wouldn't be enough."

"Nah, I just want one."

"No can do! Honesty is key when it comes ta business. If doin' so means I'll be rippin' someone off, I'm better off not takin' anything at all!"

"Is that how it works?"

"It's fine, don't worry 'bout it! Just take one! You look like you're 'bout to collapse!"

"...Really appreciate it."

"You can just pay me back when you get some money. That'll be one pound."

"Ain't that a rip-off!? What happened to honest business!?"

The stall keeper chuckled. Whatever the case, it had been a while since Bastian had eaten a meal. He plopped down into a small chair beside the stall. There was no table, just a basket where he was supposed to discard the skewer once he was done eating. A few moments later, the street vendor brought over a potato skewer. Bastian took it and bit into the well-roasted spud.

It was hot... surprisingly sweet... not too salty... Overall just plain delicious. He scarfed it down in no time at all.

"Nice appetite! Have another!" Out of nowhere, the young stall keeper handed him a second one. Once again, it immediately settled in his stomach.

Just as he was beginning to amaze himself with how quickly he was eating, customers began to gather—the sight of him devouring potato skewer after potato skewer must have made them look like quite the delicacy. The other stores were closing, but this one, strangely enough, had just come back from the dead thanks to a sudden boom in business. If the street vendor had anticipated this then he really was quite the salesman; by the time Bastian had finished his last potato, the chairs around the stall were all occupied.

He had screamed as loud as he could, run as fast as he could, and now eaten as much as he could. After all that, he was feeling somewhat better—aside from being so full that he felt like he was going to vomit.

"Hah... Well, guess that's just how it is sometimes. I studied abroad because I didn't want to get involved in any of those pain-in-the-ass issues that involve the whole country, and I really don't think I should stick my nose into other nations' politics."

Elize would surely be delivered to the palace by this trustworthy uncle of hers. Bastian recalled her face—the fed-up expression she

would make while reading his story, the scornful glares she would give him as she rejected his ideas, the calm smile on her lips as she declared he wasn't normal...

Huh? Is that really all I remember? That's strange... I was sure I had some bittersweet memories in there too. Bastian cocked his head, racking his brain as a boisterous group came over to the stall.

"Oi, mate! Twen'y skewers o'er here! An' make 'em quick!"

"Righto! I'll have 'em right with ya. In the meantime, 'ave a seat, why don'tcha!"

It was a mercenary brigade of at least ten men. Bastian frowned; this wasn't the first group of mercenaries he had seen around town. He called over to the busy street vendor.

"Hey, why does this town have so many mercs? Is it always like this?"

The street vendor continued tending his potatoes, not even turning to face Bastian as he answered. "Nah, this is the first time I've seen it like this. I hear the big boss at the fort is gatherin' 'em, and thanks to that, business is on the up an' up!"

"Gathering mercs? You mean he's preparing for war?"

"How'm I supposed to know? I'm just the potato guy."

"...Fair point."

The mercenaries raised a laugh.

"Well, 'e's got my blessing if 'e'll hire us without a war goin' on!"

"Real easy money, ain't it?"

"Best job I e'er 'ad! Hyahyahya!"

"Oi, you—student kid. It's gettin' dark out. Get on 'ome!"

Not a single one spoke in the local accent; they were mercenaries from afar, meaning that Bruno Carlo was definitely preparing for something. Bastian felt as though there was a black cloud hanging over his head.

"...Why's a pacifist, an anti-war guy... preparing for war?"

"A pacifist, ya say? Bfah!" The mercenaries laughed even harder than before. "Those wimps were kicked outta the army ages ago!"

"...Huh?"

"Just take a look at this—my sword's made from that new ore stuff. Got the latest gun, too! They're just handin' 'em out all over the country. Whether it be Belgaria or Hispania we're up against, we ain't gonna lose!"

"Hear, hear!" Alcohol already in their systems, the mercenaries were quick to excitement.

"Bullcrap... If you're right, then... what does that guy need Elize for!?"

Bastian jumped up and looked toward the mountain. A number of small lights could be seen through the darkness, proceeding in file

toward the fort. Was a party of some kind climbing the mountain holding torches?

“Hey... What... What’s that up there...?” Bastian inquired though trembling lips.

Balancing a number of skewers on the wooden tray he was holding, the street vendor looked up at the mountain as well. “No merchant would go to tha fort at this hour. It’s probably some army.”

There was no time to lose. Without so much as a word, Bastian raced toward the fort.

I’ve made a huge mistake!



Elize hesitated upon hearing she had a visitor; only Bastian had known she was coming to Fort Greybridge. Who could it be? Was it the mayor from the town below? Did someone else know she was here? These were all questions she had asked Bruno Carlo, but he refused to answer.

“You shouldn’t keep them waiting.”

“...Very well.”

Elize had already wiped her body down with water and put on a new dress. It wasn’t the blue dress her mother had given her to attend the palace, but rather a brilliant red dress that looked as though it had been dyed in red wine. It was covered in frills, the skirt was open at the side, and she couldn’t seem to settle down in it.

Was this just down to Bruno Carlo’s taste in dresses? She had never received clothes from him, so she couldn’t say for sure.

Her uncle remained silent as they climbed the spiral staircase leading to the top floor of one of the fort’s towers. This was where Elize’s visitor was apparently waiting.

Bruno Carlo placed a hand on the doorknob. “I’m sorry... Truly, I am,” he muttered gently.

The moment he opened it, Elize froze. She was at a sudden loss for words, having immediately realized that she had made a grave mistake.

There, seated on the sofa in the middle of the room, was Princess Margaret.

“Good evening, Liz. How are you holding up?”

“...Ms. Margaret.”

“Fufufu... Oh, be a dear and call me Greta, won’t you? Aren’t we close enough for that? As cousins who share the same blood, we’re practically sisters.”

“Ah... This dress...”

The dress Margaret was wearing was the same as her own: bright red and covered in frills. Elize had a feeling it suited Margaret better;

her black hair falling over her brilliant scarlet dress was mesmerizing, like a drop of ink spreading through high-grade red wine.

The seated princess offered Elize a welcoming smile. “Oh, how wonderful, it suits you perfectly. Heaven knows what I would have done if you hadn’t liked it.”

“Ah... Err... Thank you.”

“What’s wrong, Liz? Don’t be a stranger—come right in.”

“...Of course.”

Elize made her resolve and entered the room. Margaret was patting the sofa cushion beside her with one hand, beckoning her over, but Elize still had some resistance to offer.

“I’m fine where I am,” she said, opting to remain standing a short distance away. But Margaret didn’t seem to be the slightest bit insulted, the wide grin spread across her lips unchanged.

The circular room they were in had three windows and a single door—namely the one that Elize had entered through, which was now being blocked by Bruno Carlo. A knight clad in all white stood beside Margaret, so unmoving that Elize was beginning to wonder whether he was actually a wax statue. He was slender and tall, and both his eyes and his gray hair were touched with a pale blue. A slender sword hung at his waist.

Noticing how warily Elize was watching him, Margaret glanced over at the knight. “Why, introduce yourself already. You’ve met at last.”

The knight offered a deep bow. “Your Majesty Princess Elizabeth, it is an honor to be of your acquaintance. I am merely Colonel Oswald Coulthard, a strategy officer in High Britannia’s military headquarters.”

She could instinctively tell that this man was a terrifying human being.

“...My name is Elizabeth Victoria.”

Margaret reached out a hand from the sofa, prodding at the white knight’s hip. “Fufufu... Oswald is the one who told me that you would be coming to this fort. He knows everything, you see.”

“I am far from all-knowing. I am but a small fish in a big pond. In fact, Princess Elizabeth arrived half a day earlier than I had anticipated.”

“Oh, is that so? I quite like the idea of you being a fish.”

Elize staggered.

“You... know everything? How?”

“You did not make any decisive oversights. You simply only had one path you could take.”

“But... That’s true, but...”

What about all the troubles she had faced on her journey? Graham

and his men had given their lives to protect her, Bastian had risked his life to save her, Elize herself had exerted more effort than ever before so that she could finally reach the fort.

And this whole time, she had been dancing in the palm of a man called Oswald. He did not seem proud of this, nor did he look at her with pity; it was as though he was missing several emotions entirely as he stared impassively at Elize.

“Princess Elizabeth, I often heard about you from Her Majesty Queen Charlotte. That you were wise, and kind, and selfless—the sort of person who would prioritize the public over her own wellbeing.”

“...Is that... what she said?” His abrupt praise only raised her guard higher.

“However, just like Queen Charlotte, it seems you fail to grasp the bigger picture. This country has already proceeded past the point of no return. A proclamation of pacifism will only tear the nation apart.”

Elize grit her teeth. “A good joke, to be sure. You warmongers are the ones who made the world that way. How strange it is, for the people’s thoughts to change so much in just a few years.”

“It is as you say. I have no way of denying it.”

“And what will we gain from sacrificing this nation’s people to war?”

Oswald placed a hand over his mouth. Was he holding back a laugh? “Queen Charlotte asked me the same question—let’s see how similar you really are. The answer I gave her was ‘money.’”

“How could you?” Elize could feel a heat rising in her chest.

“How deplorable.” Margaret gave a shrug. “Dear Oswald, you really are deplorable. Money is surprisingly boring; once you have it, there’s nothing more to want. It’s deplorable that you can’t comprehend that.”

“It is as you say. This petty officer is steeped in greed, and lusts after trifling matters.”

“I really am disappointed in you,” Margaret said, giving Oswald a small, playful punch.

“What will you gain by gathering money?” Elize asked, “If your goal was simply to live in luxury then there’d be no need for you to do this, as you already have more than enough. I refuse to believe you’re acting on avarice alone.”

“Honestly... You’re meeting me for the first time, and yet you already see through me?”

“If greed was all that drove you, Ms. Margaret would never keep you by her side!”

“Hm.”

“Look at you! Did you hear that? Liz figured me out. It’s like I’ve been stripped bare. It sends a shiver down my spine.”

Oswald nodded in admiration. "Correct. You astound me. It was foolish of me to appraise you as the same as Queen Charlotte—you are certainly wiser than her. As you say, simply gathering money is not my objective."

"Then...?"

"War is my objective. Money is required to wage a war, and a war with Belgaria will allow us to raise coin—coin that will then be used to wage further wars. Endless. Perpetual. The wars shall continue until my body rots to dust, this country falls to its last legs, soldiers and civilians all collapse alike, and the nation is naught but ash in the wind."

"Oh my, that does sound interesting," said Margaret, "But won't you tire of it eventually?"

Elize closed in on Oswald, her eyes wide open. "Wh-What are you... Are you... Are you serious about that!?"

"Am I serious? Am I sane?"

"Answer me!"

"It would depend on the will of my master, Princess Margaret."

"Wh-What!?"

The very woman in question held her stomach in exaggerated laughter as she rolled over on the sofa. It was practically the cackle of a witch.

Elize was so infuriated that tears began to well up in her eyes. *These people are just using this country as their plaything! They're churning it up all to stave off boredom, watching the mess they create as though it's a hilarious comedy. That's all it is.*

She glared toward the door. "Bruno Carlo! You're trying to curry favor with this lot!? I won't force you to be a pacifist... but do you have no pride? No dignity as a soldier who protects the nation of High Britannia!?"

"...I'm sorry, Elizabeth. I could have turned against them, but all that would have led to is the fort receiving a new commander."

"Kh..."

Having noticed Margaret's gaze move to the teapot on the table beside the sofa, Oswald knelt down and began to pour the steaming liquid into a cup for her.

"You often find war equated to chess, but this petty officer sees it differently. Chess, you see, is more akin to building an organization. A battlefield has no queen or rook that can reach from end to end. To use royal authority to crumble the opposing force from its weakest pieces, seizing more pawns using the force of those you send into their midst... As long as you manage to use fewer moves than it takes for the enemy to regain ground, you will eventually reach the king."

Margaret brought the teacup to her lips. "How rare, Oswald.

You're having fun for once. I rarely hear you exchange idle banter."

"Pardon my discourtesy."

"It's fine. How about I banter a bit next? Hey, Liz... What sort of person is this Bastian fellow who traveled with you?"

"Huh? How...?"

"I looked into your school. I hear he's a Belgian noble. But 'Bastian' is quite an interesting name—why, that's the same name as their third prince. What's more, he has red eyes and extraordinary strength."

"That's... just a coincidence."

"It pains my heart that I shall never meet him. Bruno Carlo sent him away. How terrible. What are you going to do about this?"

"M-My apologies... I received word he was considerably skilled, so I did not want to risk him being anywhere near you, Princess Margaret." Bruno Carlo lowered his head from the door, only to be completely ignored as Margaret clapped her hands.

"Right, Liz, I brought you a tart. I baked it especially for you. I'm sure it will be delicious."

As always, Margaret was ever so abrupt at changing the topic. Whenever she grew bored in the midst of conversation, she would bring up something completely different without any reservation or consideration.

Elize faltered. "I, um... don't have much of an appetite right now. I only just had dinner."

"Oh dear, is that so? You should eat it anyway. I mean, this will be your last meal."

Despite having just declared what was quite literally a death sentence, Margaret spoke as casually and as cheerfully as if she had just offered someone a cup of tea. She made it seem as though these were just ordinary words from her usual day-to-day, and Elize couldn't help but retreat a step.

Her back was pressed up against the window.

"Erk."

The tower grew narrower the higher it stretched, and the top floor was too cramped for her to try to run. Leaving his teapot on the table, Oswald rose to his feet.

"Today is the 20th... The 22nd is the last of the Seven Days of Silence, and the day we attend Queen Charlotte's funeral."

"Th-That's right. I would love to attend—in fact, I wouldn't dream of missing it."

"...Then I must ask that you attend right next to Her Majesty."

Oswald's right hand went to his sword. He wouldn't draw it just yet; he was waiting for something.

Margaret placed a box on the table. When she opened it, it did

indeed contain a tart. A strawberry tart. Elize hoped it was sweet; she was no good with sour foods. She couldn't comprehend in the slightest why this girl had prepared something that Elize herself couldn't tell whether she would like.

Her back to the window, she had nowhere to run.

"Kh... The end... What's your endgame...?"

Margaret's lips curled into a smile. "I don't know about Oswald, but I'm fine as long as I'm having fun. As long as I'm not bored. But what does it mean to have fun anyway?"

"The regular and continuous happiness of Princess Margaret is this petty officer's sole reason for existence."

At that moment, the world outside the window was enveloped in a flash of radiant light. It was like lightning. Like noon had returned for one last burst of glory. It was immediately followed by an impact so great that Elize worried the glass she was leaning against might break.

"Eek!?" The ear-rending roar that accompanied it caused Elize to squeak in surprise.

Oswald glared at the window. "...He's already here. Glenda must have been defeated."

"Oh dear. See, this is why I wanted her put to death."

"Your words humble me."

Elize looked outside. A fire had broken out inside the fort; a blazing red she had never seen before, masked by dense clouds of black smoke. Then, she heard the voice of a soldier from outside the door.

"Report! Report!"

"Speak where you are!" Bruno Carlo replied.

The soldier raised his voice in a panic. "The boy who left the fort a short while ago has returned! The female knight fell into the valley! The main gate has been breached!"

"Ye gods—!?"

But the commander seemed to be the only one taken by surprise. Not just Elize, but Oswald and Margaret also seemed to have a grasp on Bastian's strength.

The next messenger came soon and, much like the first, also spoke to Bruno Carlo through the door. "The gunpowder in the first magazine caught fire during the hostilities! Even if we had all of our men try to extinguish it, the flames are too strong to—"

"You imbecile! The first magazine is right beside our oil storage!"

"The oil caught fire and exploded a moment ago, sir!"

"Kuh... So that's what that was..."

The report continued: "The first through to the thirteenth platoons have been annihilated, and the intruder is approaching this very

tower!”

“Commander, take shelter!” another soldier called out, “We have currently formed a defensive line in front of the tower, and have three ranks of thirty men providing continuous volley fire. However, his occasional counterattacks have produced casualties, and—”

“You’re up against a single boy!” Bruno Carlo screamed, “Why are we taking *any* casualties!?”

“Th-That’s because... chunks of rock suddenly come flying out from behind the stone wall he’s using as cover! We can already see the invader, but he must be using some sort of catapult.”

“What nonsense are you spouting!? If you’re all half-asleep, I’ll shove the lot of you into the river!”

An unthinkable battle against a lone human opponent—a foe with no sword, no bow, and no gun. They were against an enemy who relied on nothing but his own strength, sending the soldiers into panic. On top of that, he moved too fast for their bullets to hit.

“It’s only a matter of time,” Oswald said with a shrug.

“My, my... What a bother. Are we in a terrible predicament, by any chance? Am I going to die here?”

“The eternal Princess Margaret need not worry about such matters.”

Elize had heard the report. She could also hear the ceaseless gunfire outside the window. Her chest grew hot. *He’s... right below us!?*

She deftly unlatched the window behind her, then shoved it open shoulder first. As the wind rushing along the mountainside noisily poured in, the nearby curtain was hoisted high into the air. The potent smell of burning and the fumes made it painful to breathe.

“No, my hair!” Margaret shrieked, “The wind will mess it up!”

“...Mh.” Oswald drew his sword and readied himself, but he wasn’t moving to strike Elize’s turned back. Instead, he remained standing by Margaret, ready to protect her. “Princess Margaret, please stay still.”

“What is it?”

“It’s the enemy,” he said, his eyes focused on the neighboring tower.

Elize leaned out of the window. They were quite a long way from the ground, and there was no foreseeable end to the gunfire below. At the top of her lungs, she screamed:

“BASTIAAAAAAAN!!”

Elize yelled so loud that her throat went raw, desperately hoping he would hear her down below, and yet a response came from right beside her.

“Yo. I knew you’d be here.”

“Eh!?” Elize’s face snapped up. There, sticking his head out of the

window on the top floor of the nearest tower, was Bastian. He seemed almost close enough to reach out and grasp.

“Are you still alive? Are you hurt? Have they done anything to you?”

“Ah...” Tears started to well up in her eyes. She tried to hold them back, but to no avail—before she knew it, tears were streaming down her cheeks. “Snff... Bastian...”

The boy’s face was covered in soot, his clothes were torn, and he was dripping blood. A number of guns were secured under his left armpit, while his right hand held but a single knife.

“Wh-What are you crying for, Elize!? Have you been injured!?”

“No, not at all... The smoke just stings... That is all.”

“Oh, really? Well, in any case, I’m glad I made it in time.”



Bastian had reached the end of his tether. Bullets traveled faster than even the most skilled knights in the lands could thrust, making them impossible to react to once fired. All he could do was try to predict where his enemies would shoot, and then dodge just before they pulled the trigger. But the more opponents there were, the more he would have to anticipate, and more readied guns also meant fewer places to use as cover.

By predicting where his foes were going to shoot and running several times faster than his limit, Bastian was eventually able to make his way through the hail of gunfire. It was a considerably tiring feat, and it wasn’t as though he had managed to avoid every bullet—two had met their mark, gouging deep into his back. Perhaps he looked fine from the front, but he was bleeding heavily enough to soak through anything that touched him.

He couldn’t overstay his welcome. The soldiers were recovering from their panic, and he would be in serious danger if they managed to calm down and surrounded him; his speed and his ability to predict his enemy’s movements were useless if there were no safe spots he could use as cover.

Bastian focused on keeping his breathing steady. “That gal over there... Don’t tell me that’s Princess Margaret!?”

Intentionally popping her face out from behind the white knight guarding her, the girl with fluttering black hair waved her hand.

“Yoohoo! We finally meet. So you’re—”

“It is dangerous, Your Highness!” The knight moved to block her from view.

“What’s your problem, Oswald?”

“I have lost all of my honor. To think this man would breach the fort’s defenses alone, and this quickly... He has greatly surpassed this

petty officer's expectations."

"I see. You're floundering quite a bit, Mr. Fish," Margaret chuckled behind him.

Bastian dropped a gun into his right hand and aimed at the knight called Oswald. Even if Oswald were to avoid the attack, the bullet would at least hit Margaret behind him—or so he hoped.

"The soldiers didn't put up much of a fight... You think they've just given up on protecting a naughty little princess? They even clued me in on your location because of where they retreated to!"

Oswald lightly shook his head. "Troop morale is at an all-time high. They have simply never been trained to deal with someone as fast, as strong, and as clever as you, Prince Bastian."

"Clever? Well, shucks— Ah, hold up, no! I'm not a prince, okay!?" Bastian exclaimed, pushing up his glasses. While he realized that his true identity was already out in the open, he continued trying his best to deny it.

Despite his nervous countenance, Oswald smirked. "Your abilities do surpass this petty officer's expectations. But there are some limits to working alone."

"Huh?"

"Bastian, behind you!" Elize screamed, leaning over the window frame.

Bastian ducked without hesitation, just as a powerful swipe crossed where his neck had been mere moments ago. A large sheet of fabric dropped to the floor as the curtain beside the window was cleanly sliced in two.

He released the rifles he had been hoarding under his left arm, turned to face his attacker, and then immediately fired the gun that was already loaded in his right hand. Blood splattered from his target.

Bullseye!

He was up against Glenda. She gripped the fresh wound on her shoulder as she crouched down in pain.

"Urrgh... Still... I can still... fight..."

"You serious?"

He had only just fought her at the fort gate. He hadn't landed a killing blow, but he was sure he had at least rendered her incapable of combat. It just went to show that, among its ranks, High Britannia had its own share of people with inhuman physical prowess like himself.

But Bastian was pulled from his amazement by a piercing scream. He hurriedly looked back toward Elize; she was desperately clinging onto the window ledge, her entire body dangling above the sheer drop below. Her expression was pale, and she looked as though she might lose her grip at any moment.

Oswald cautiously shuffled over, sword in hand. "While the

method lacks elegance, allow me to put an end to you here.”

“W-Wait!”

Bastian’s mind was racing. *Should I scoop up a gun and shoot him? No, that’d take too long—he’ll have sliced Elize before I can even pull the trigger. Throw my dagger, then? Might work if Oswald’s just some average soldier, but what if he’s really agile? He’ll either dodge or strike it down. Either way, it won’t save her.*

“Prince Bastian! Let’s all watch as the very reason you fight disappears!”

“I’m... no prince!!”

Bastian threw himself into the open air, mustering all of his strength as he kicked off of the tower wall. Then, he reached out his hand.

“Jump!”

“Bastian!!”

Surprised as she was, Elize didn’t hesitate. She managed to release the window ledge just moments before Oswald’s sword could crush her slender fingers.

“What!? She actually jumped...!?”

She fell through the night sky, her blond hair and red dress blowing madly in the wind. Bastian, who had leapt from the neighboring tower, reached his arms as far as they would go.

“Elize!”

“Bastian!”



Elize reached out as well, her fingertips almost brushing his as the distance closed more and more. The moment their hands touched, Bastian firmly pulled her close. His right arm locked around Elize, Bastian reached his left toward the tower's outer wall; not only did he still have the momentum from his kick off of the tower wall, but the tower grew wider the further down they fell, so grabbing on to a window along the way would be an absolute non-issue for him. And so, he stretched out and caught the ledge of a nearby window, his arm enduring the tremendous force as they came to a sudden stop.

At that moment, his back let off a loud *crack*.

"Gah!!"

"A-Are you all right, Bastian!?"

"I'm fine... C'mon... Before they start shooting again..."

"Right!"

Elize was quite able-bodied—in fact, she was among the fitter members of her class. She grabbed onto the window, hoisted herself up, and slipped inside. Bastian followed suit, but the moment he was on solid ground again, he collapsed onto the floor. His arms and legs were sprawled out, and his breathing was noticeably rough.

"Hah... Hah... Hah... Hah..."

The pain in his back was so bad that he couldn't even move.

"You've saved me yet again..." Elize was moved to tears.

"Hah... Hah... Have you... given up yet, Elize?"

"H-Huh?"

"It's the 20th today."

"It is."

"We won't make it in time... if we walk from here... but a carriage... just might..."

"You're right. I won't give up—for the people who've saved me."

"Figured as much!"

Bastian picked himself up, only for Elize to immediately swallow her breath. "Bastian! What are those wounds!?"

"Don't worry about it... They're down to my own blunders... If we stick around any longer, they'll have us surrounded."

"Y-Yes." Her voice quavered.

Bastian couldn't blame her for being concerned; he knew he was in hot water, and that feeling only grew stronger when he saw just how much blood stained the ground where he had lain. There was so much that he would readily believe it if someone told him a person had been murdered there.

"But hey, heroes of justice get the blessing of the faeries... I ain't gonna die here."

"Well, you must be okay if you still have the energy to make

jokes.”

Bastian and Elize headed for the spiral staircase, making their way down as quickly as they could.



To elude the soldiers waiting for them at the bottom, they leapt from the tower once again, this time from a safer height. Elize was being held in a princess carry, and while she found that embarrassing, now wasn't really the time to complain.

Bastian was struggling a lot more than he had anticipated, however. Elize wasn't heavy by any means, but his legs had grown increasingly fatigued, and he had lost quite a lot of blood. His situation was only further complicated by the fact that he needed to use both hands to carry her, making it impossible to crawl, roll, or block.

He grit his teeth. “Kh... This ain't good...”

“Are you pushing yourself too hard, Bastian!? If you go alone, then you should at least—”

“Huh? What are you on about? Keep that up and you'll get a spanking.”

“Hyah!? B-But...”

“When I say this ain't good, I'm talking about my masterpiece, of course! In it, the protagonist is swinging a giant sword around willy-nilly while the heroine's in his arms, but how'd that even be possible!? Does he have four arms or something!?”

Bastian finally understood that he had been writing without even picturing the scene—a realization so embarrassing that he wanted to curl up and die.

“I'm seriously screwed! I've gotta fix that, or else my readers are gonna be pissed!”

“I can't believe this. Do you know where we are right now!?”

“Hahaha... Where we are? You almost make it sound like I'm in some huge predicament.”

“You're not?”

“Well, I've escaped the tower. Now I just need to make my way through an enemy fort, surrounded by soldiers using the latest firearms, with a princess occupying both of my hands. The bullet holes in my back are starting to sting a bit, sure... but that's about it.”

“Oh really...”

“If a formidable foe I couldn't win against in my condition stood in our way, or if we had to pass through an open space without any cover, *then* I would count it as a predicament.”

“You amaze me. Even if your words are empty, to be able to say that much really is something.”

“They’re not empty. I’m the epitome of good health right now.”

Elize was in his arms, and that alone made his body feel strangely lighter. *Stressed? Shot? Surrounded? So what!?*

He was in a strange mood.

Finally, Bastian reached the fort’s outer walls. He moved Elize onto his back, then began scaling the wall as easily as one might scramble up a rope ladder. There were a few small, uneven dents here and there, but nothing that could feasibly serve as a foothold. This wasn’t a problem for Bastian, however—it made things tougher as there was only a small area he could apply force to, but his strength was more than enough to compensate for that. As far as he was concerned, a sturdy rock wall was far easier to climb than a gently sloping sand dune that crumbled under one’s feet.

Bastian had more going for him than he himself realized. Carrying Elize had psyched him up, and now even the architecture of Fort Greybridge seemed to be in his favor. It had been carefully designed to keep enemies from coming in, but no such measures had been taken to stop those already inside from escaping.

In addition to this, the disrupted chain of command meant that not every soldier was on alert. Before he had arrived, they had simply been ordered to defend the fort, and only half of them had since received the order to stop him from getting away.

The way the soldiers saw it, they weren’t up against an attacker, but a runaway. And what’s more, this runaway boasted strength unthinkable for a human. Naturally, few were brave enough to actively block his retreat.

Margaret’s royal guard was trying so desperately to protect the royal carriage from the raging fire that they hadn’t even noticed that their princess had been attacked, though this obliviousness could also be attributed to their commanding officer, Oswald, having not considered them a part of his fighting force.

Bastian stealthily took down the soldiers atop the wall. All he really did was push them off, so they would survive the fall with a bit of luck. When his own life was in such danger, he could not be expected to hold such an unrealistic ideal as not taking any lives, especially those of opposing soldiers; they had taken up weapons intended to kill, so surely they had made the resolve for their own lives to be taken away.

On any other night, it would be too dark to see any more than perhaps some faint silhouettes under the moonlight. But right now, an entire tower was ablaze, essentially acting as a massive torch. It was bright enough that they could see all the way down to the town below.

“Ah, looks like we’ll actually have to cross that bridge.”

“...What did you do on the way here?”

“Well, that knight, Glenda, challenged me one-on-one. I took advantage of the battle to push her up against the gate, then kicked her into the river and climbed up the wall. But seriously, how was I supposed to know she was following me? She wasn’t wet when I saw her just a moment ago, so maybe she didn’t fall at all.”

“The river, huh?”

“Hey, do you think jumping in’ll be a whole lot faster than crossing the bridge?”

“If we jump from here, we’ll probably die!”

“Thought so. We’d be fine if we hit the water, but...”

Reaching the water wouldn’t be impossible, especially given that the past few days of rain had caused the river to overflow, but it was still quite a distance away from the surrounding walls. Furthermore, the fort was in a V-shaped valley; the walls cast a shadow over everything below, meaning it was too dark to make out where they might land. Were they to jump from here, it was entirely possible that they wouldn’t reach the river, instead landing on the rocks below, and Elize didn’t look like the sort who would survive such a fall.

“...But... something’s not right,” Bastian said, scowling behind him. Yells could be heard coming from the fort as those inside attempted to quell the fire, but there was no sign of any pursuers. He could sense soldiers, but they weren’t attacking. It almost seemed as though they were trying to stifle their breath. “Are they waiting for us to cross the bridge?”

“I would be willing to bet on it.”

Bastian felt the ground rumble beneath his feet; the gate connected straight to the bridge was being opened. As Bastian and Elize were already atop the wall, keeping it shut would only hold back the soldiers on their tail. It was a daring move.

But only one person walked out through the open gate—a single knight clad in white-painted armor. It was Oswald. He raised his voice to no one in particular.

“You’ve finally reached the wall, I take it! All that you need to do now is cross the bridge, and you will have made your escape, but naturally, it would be impossible to dodge the hail of bullets that will assail you!”

He had to have known they were listening.

“But there is no class in shooting a retreating foe in the back!” Oswald continued, “Above all, after my string of failures, such a move would disappoint the resplendent Princess Margaret and cost me what little honor I have left!”

Bastian hugged Elize close. He could easily see this man drawing their attention with a speech while someone else moved to shoot them

from behind. He probed for enemies.

“...I’m not sensing anything... Is that not his game?”

“B-Bastian...!?”

He had been holding her tight the entire time he was running, and yet Elize appeared to be blushing from just a small hug. Bastian really couldn’t tell where she drew the line, but her embarrassment was infectious, and he backed off a little.

“Err... Anyway. Don’t go too far. It may be night, but when it’s this bright out, they’ll have men good enough to pick you off.”

“Y-Yes. Of course.” Elize corrected the disarrayed hem of her dress. This was no time to be smitten.

Bastian threw his voice to Oswald on the bridge. “We’re right here! What do you want!?” Doing so gave away their position, but as he had pushed their lookout off of the wall just a moment ago, the enemy likely already knew their general location. That was probably why the commander himself had come out.

“I request a duel!” Oswald called in response, “I have my reputation to protect. After suffering so many losses, I would be a laughing stock if I relied on my superior numbers and the rough terrain to take you out.”

“Are you stupid or something!? There’s absolutely nothing for us to gain by agreeing!”

“If you can beat me, not only will you be free to go without any further harm, but I will personally escort you to the palace as well.”

“What!?”

“How does that sound? Even if you manage to escape here, it will be near impossible to reach the palace in the few days you have left. It is a fine proposal, wouldn’t you agree?”

“Like I can trust you!”

“Indeed, this petty officer’s words hold absolutely no value! However, these are the words of the sacred Princess Margaret!”

Bastian couldn’t see the soldiers, but he could hear a stir coming from inside the fort. Was Margaret watching this exchange?

“Let me think about it!” Bastian replied curtly before addressing the girl beside him. “Hey, Elize... What sort of character is that Margaret gal? She seemed pretty flippant.”

He used to conceal his identity and go out into town quite often, but that was the first time anyone had ever greeted him with a “yoohoo.”

“Honestly, my cousin’s gone completely off her rocker—even more so than I thought. I can’t tell you what’s on her mind, but... perhaps even the position of queen is inconsequential to her as long as she has fun. Oswald, however, may be a different story.”

“Whatever the case, she actually might honor the proposal...”

"It could be a trap."

"...No, it's not a trap. Can you think of any situation worse than running across an open bridge with soldiers taking shots at you? Is there any trap more reliable than that?"

"Are you going?"

"Yeah. I'm going."

Elize suddenly clung onto him. "You can't go!"

"W-Wah!? What's wrong now!?"

"Take me with you. I don't want you to be the only one getting hurt."

"...Fine. I'd say it's dangerous, but everywhere's dangerous here."

Now that he thought about it, leaving Elize here meant that he would be unable to do anything if soldiers came for her. Perhaps that was precisely their aim.

"Here we go, Elize! Let's give that pompous blue prick what's coming! We'll be at the palace by tomorrow!"

"Let's do it!"



Bastian slid down the rockface to stand before Oswald. The fort was behind him, its gate open, and Margaret was presumably watching from inside. All he could note for the time being was that the soldiers were armed with High Britannia's newest rifles. He could run, but he couldn't outrun bullets, and if they had horsemen, they would be able to outpace him on the mountain road, assuming he was carrying Elize.

"So we have to beat you and have Princess Margaret honor the promise... That's the only option you've left for us," he said.

"You made it all the way here, protecting Princess Elizabeth... This is probably where I should praise you. Well done," Oswald calmly stated.

His silver tongue's not all he's got going for him... Now that he was actually confronting Oswald, Bastian could feel his body tense up in anticipation. They were ten paces apart. Bastian pulled out the dagger he had tucked into his breast pocket.

"...I didn't really wanna use this."

"Is that the *Vite Espace Trois*? Then you really are Prince Bastian."

"Oh, pull the other one. Start speaking some sense, why don't you."

Bastian pushed his glasses up, then instructed Elize to "Get back a little." Not that it really mattered, though: if Margaret broke her promise then there was nothing they could do, and given how close he was, even Oswald would be riddled with bullets the moment the soldiers opened fire. Bastian had to trust her, which was a truly

terrifying concept.

“Here I come!” Bastian raced forward, studying the sword that Oswald drew from his hip. It was slender and straight, better suited to thrusting than slicing, and looked as though it would break if it struck solid armor. But unfortunately, Bastian was still wearing his student uniform. Forget armor, he didn’t even have a helmet.

If there was one saving grace, it was that this made him nimbler. He closed the distance in an instant, aiming a kick at his opponent’s leg.

“Hrah!”

In swordplay, few would expect a kick as the first move, and shattering your opponent’s knee was a guaranteed victory; even when the damage done wasn’t that severe, a clean blow was usually enough to stop them from moving. As Bastian was only using a dagger, it would be much easier for his opponent to strike first, so a surprise attack wasn’t a bad move... Or so he thought.

Oswald’s expression remained completely unchanged, looking as composed as ever. “There you are.” He thrust his rapier toward the ground, aiming for Bastian’s feet. Bastian immediately twisted his body to avoid it, but a second attack far too fast to dodge pierced his flank.

“Gwah!?”

“Hm... So you can dodge that. Then how about this?”

The next thrust came before Bastian had the chance to regain his stance. He frantically moved to parry with his dagger but didn’t feel any resistance; Oswald had slickly pulled his weapon back.

“New ore or not, I’m only using a rapier. I would like to avoid crossing swords with a blade made of trystie, if I can help it.”

“Are you for real? Bastard... Did you just move faster than me?”

How long had it been since he had taken an attack he couldn’t avoid in a one-on-one battle? How long had it been since someone had been able to counter one of his kicks? It was true that Bastian was already worn out and injured, but there was no doubting that his opponent was not normal.

“If the congenial Princess Margaret has ordered me to win, then I am unable to hold back.”

“Interesting!”

Still, Bastian was certain he wouldn’t lose in a contest of speed. He stepped in, but the moment he swung his dagger, the tip of Oswald’s rapier sprouted right before his eyes. Bastian barely avoided it, the blade just catching his nose.

I can use the dagger to aim for his hand, but...

The retracting sword sliced Bastian’s shoulder. He wrenched his body, using the same motion to drive his left fist toward Oswald, but

his opponent simply used his own left hand to knock the punch aside. In contrast to Bastian's direct, instinctive actions, Oswald's movements were smoothly drawing out circles, almost as if—

“You're anticipating my moves!?”

“Prince Bastian, you are faster than the average person could hope to be. You are strong enough to crush stone. But your movements themselves are no better than an amateur's.”

“Wha—!? An amateur!?” He swung his dagger once more, then launched another kick. Nothing. This confirmed it—Oswald wasn't faster, but he was one step ahead. He was able to predict what Bastian was going to do next. The rapier caught him once more.

“Gh...”

Thinking back, this is what it was like to fight Eddie's gramps—the famed swordsman, Balthazar.

Against normal foes, Bastian just needed to concentrate and it was as if everything was moving in slow motion. He couldn't be bothered to anticipate anything—he had no need to. He could simply look at how their muscles and their eyes moved to determine their next action. That was what allowed him to dodge gunfire.

However, a true master-class foe made barely any preparatory movement; the attacks were coming before he could even register them, so he wouldn't be able to react fast enough to block or dodge. And if Bastian's own movements and thoughts were being read, no matter how fast he attacked, the enemy was already prepared for his every move.

This ain't good. This guy's actually strong!

Compared to this, Bastian's previous experiences were a breeze. Having deliberately aimed his attacks to weaken Bastian's stance, Oswald lunged again, this time slicing into his side with relative ease. With each new injury he sustained, Bastian could feel his body grow heavier.

Sure, Bastian had the advantage when it came to speed, but that meant nothing here—it was as though his opponent was choosing the shortest route through a city he knew like the back of his hand, while Bastian was left wandering through an unknown metropolis. He could just barely catch up by sprinting at full speed, but he was wasting so much time that the slightest detour would mean his loss.

Oswald maintained a safe distance and corrected his stance, returning to perfect form.

My only opportunity is when he backs off.

The more Bastian attempted to fight, the more their exchange repeated, and the worse the situation became. Oswald knew every move he was going to make, but how? Was it because Bastian's weapon was a dagger, which limited his range of attacks? But why

were they so limited? Was it because the enemy's weapon had greater reach, making it easier for them to strike first unless he was careful?

And if this guy lands a hit, then...

"Don't lose your nerve!" Bastian yelled at himself.

"Now then, it's about time to wrap this up."

"Bahahaha... Let me show you my true power! Powers of darkness, reside in my blade!"

"...I beg your pardon? Am I about to face Prince Bastian's true power, or the powers of darkness? Which will it be?"

"Th-They're both my power!"

Oswald was backing off again. Bastian stopped breathing to focus.

All-or-nothing charge!

"HYAAAAAAAHH!!"

"How very reckless of you."

As expected, Oswald was already prepared to counter, holding up his rapier and aiming it at the oncoming opponent. If Bastian continued charging forward, he would be skewered like a potato.

"So what!?"

Bastian pressed on regardless, using his dagger to just barely push the rapier's tip away from his vitals. Keeping his movements as small as possible so that Oswald wouldn't have time to dodge, he aimed for the first place he could reach.

"What!?" Oswald's eyes opened wide.

"Your hand's mine!"

Bastian lunged forward, allowing Oswald's blade to stab into his flank; there was nothing he could do to avoid it. As the chill of metal sunk into his body, he swung the *Vite Espace Trois*.

Got him!

Fresh blood spilled across the stone bridge, splattering on impact like water dumped from a pot.

"How's that!?" Bastian jeered.

"Gh... Inconceivable..."

Oswald let go of his rapier; the attack hadn't cut deep enough to completely sever his hand, but blood still gushed from the fresh wound. Bastian was in no better shape, bleeding just as uncontrollably from the blade impaled through his stomach.

This is my last chance!

He stepped back, the rapier still pierced through him, and grabbed Elize by the waist.

"Hyah!? Bast—!?"

"We're leaving," he whispered in her ear, before pulling her under one arm and jumping off of the stone bridge.

"Kyaaaaaaaah!!"

"GRAAAAAAAAHH!!"

Elize's scream and Bastian's manly cry quickly faded into the depths of the ravine. It was much easier to reach the water from the center of the bridge than from the surrounding walls. A few moments later, there was a splash; they had landed in the river below.

Gripping the wound on his wrist, Oswald curled his lips into a smile. "Splendid work... Prince Bastian."

The nearby soldiers immediately rushed over.

"Are you all right, sir!?"

"Captain! Your injury!"

"Officer!"

A few paces behind the medic was Princess Margaret. She slowly made her way over; it had likely been quite a while since she had walked such a distance on her own two feet. There was an ever-so-amused look on her face.

"So you couldn't win, little fish."

"To disappoint the invincible Princess Margaret... My shame is never-ending. I truly am incompetent."

"That was incredible. Did he let himself get stabbed so that he could jump in the river?"

"It is as you say. He distracted me with his gibberish, and then used that opportunity to regain his breath. I was forced to let it all go as Prince Bastian wanted."

"Oh dear. Aren't you at least going to try to act strong? Perhaps you could say that you saw it coming and deliberately allowed him to cut your wrist."

"I did realize his intention, but had I pulled my hand back any sooner, I would have dropped my rapier. The duel would have been my loss."

The medic used scissors to cut away his sleeve, then washed the wound with water. Oswald was bleeding heavily, but could at least still move his fingers.

"Captain, do your fingers feel numb?" the medic asked.

"The cut isn't deep enough for that."

"Good. Then you should be better in a few days."

Margaret reached her hand toward Oswald, placing it over his wound. Then, she dug her fingers into it.

"Hn!!"

The pain was so intense that Oswald could no longer hold his usual emotionless expression. His entire body stiffened up, and he clenched his teeth together as he tried to endure the agony. Margaret simply observed his reaction, a pleasant smile on her face.

"Does it hurt? It hurts, doesn't it?"

"It is as you say. However, simply knowing that I am being touched by the lovely Princess Margaret is enough for my pain to be

overpowered by delight.”

“Is that so? You really are an incorrigible fish. It’s too smoky here. Everywhere is covered in soot. I want a bath.”

“Then shall we return to the palace?”

She glanced at the tower, which was still on fire, and her smile grew even wider. “Yes, let’s. I’ve already grown tired of this place,” she said, licking the fresh blood from her fingers.

Final Chapter: War! War! War!

He dreamt that he was writhing in a sea of blood. There was a hand—a hand he knew he could never let go of—but he didn't know who it belonged to. The fingers were pale and slender, like those of a young girl. He could tell he needed to protect her no matter what, but his arms were drained of all strength.

He remembered it now; the girl's name was—

No sooner had it come to mind than she was dragged into the sea's depths. Only faint, dreamy voices remained, lingering in his ear.
...*Why did you let go?*

“Elize!!”

“Eep!”

When Bastian sprung up, the girl he had remembered was there, looking as though she was about to cry. He was in a room somewhere, and a faint light—presumably from the morning sun—streamed in through the window. Underneath him was a hard bed, and his body was wrapped in white bandages, stained dark red in places by what had to have been blood.

“This is...”

“U-Um... Bastian... are you... a-alive?”

“...Elize is here... Is this... the country of light?”

“Thank God. It really is you.”

“Elize!” Bastian exclaimed, pulling her close.

“Hyah!?”

Judging by the warmth of her body, her soft skin, and her beating heart...

“You're still alive! You're alive, right!? You didn't sink! I... I didn't let go, did I?”

“L-Let go, Bastian... Ah, you can't... Not now... S-Someone's watching.”

“Eh?” He raised his head and looked around. A girl in glasses had turned an incredible shade of red.

“Fwaaaah...”

She was dressed like a maid and had hair so splendidly red that, had they been in Belgaria, she would have no doubt been compared to the emperor. Based on her appearance, she was around their age.

Using her hands to cover the lenses of her glasses, the girl turned

her head the other way. "I-I'm not watching! Go right ahead!"

"Err... With what...?"

"C'mon, Nastyan! How embarrassing can you be!?" Elize began thrashing in his arms. Having only just realized he had pulled her into an embrace, Bastian let go, albeit reluctantly.

"Did you just call me something incredible?"

"It's the perfect name for you. Such indecency the very moment you wake up. I thought my heart would stop from the shame. Just when... Just when I was saved by you."

And just like that, her cheeks flushed as well. The two girls were blushing hard enough to let off steam.

"...What's up with these two?" Unable to understand the situation at all, Bastian could do nothing except cock his head.

"Here." The maid in glasses returned with water.

"Thank you!"

"My name is Shia. I have served the Tirasio Laverde House since I was ten years of age, and will turn seventeen this year."

"Oh, then you're a year older than me. The name's Bastian. I'm studying abroad from Belgaria, and—"

Elize cut him off. "I've already explained the gist of it: that you're the third son of a Belgarian count who came to study in High Britannia, only to be attacked in the town of Greybridge by some failed-mercenaries-turned-bandits."

"Yeah, that about sums it up."

"I know I've already introduced myself, but since we're all here—I am Elize Archibald. Tragedy befell my family, and I was on my way back home from the private academy in Applewood, but... it is dangerous for a child to travel alone."

She sure knows how to make up a story. Bastian found himself rather impressed, and the earnest-looking girl, Shia, nodded along without any visible doubt.

"I'm pretty sure I jumped into a river—how did we get out of that?" asked Bastian.

"Don't tell me you jumped in thinking we wouldn't be able to get out?" Elize snapped.

"N-No, I never said that..."

In all honesty, his only concern had been getting Elize to safety, but he knew she would get seriously annoyed if he admitted that.

"We were carried downstream. There were a few places where the current picked up, but we luckily made it through without major injury. You were in real danger though, Bastian—you were unconscious and took in a lot of water. We were really lucky."

"How so?"

“A carriage belonging to the Tiraso Laverde House just happened to pass by, and they had a doctor with them. The swift measures they took saved your life.”

“I see...”

Nobles were few in number, and skilled doctors were even harder to find. He really couldn't deny just how fortunate they had been.

“Had the sword in your stomach gone in any deeper, you would have been in critical condition.”

“Ah, so that's it... Then I really should be thanking my book.”

“Correct.”

Bastian checked his stomach. It was wrapped in white cloth, but there was nothing else noteworthy about it.

“Huh!? Where's my book!? What happened to my future masterpiece!?”

“Th-That's...” Elize glanced to one side, her eyes focusing on a chair beside the bed. Sitting atop it was the book—or at least, what had once been a book. The cover had been torn off, the pages were misaligned, it had been pierced by a blade, and the damp paper had swelled almost into pulp. And, as the finishing blow, it had been completely soaked in blood.

Bastian's lips quivered. “A-Amazing! That looks so cursed! Isn't that just the coolest!?”

Elize sighed. “There's no saving that personality of yours.”

“It's really cool, seriously! Ah, but you can't even read it anymore, can you?”

“...No. Not only did most of the ink bleed, but half of the paper also turned to mush, so this is useless as a book.”

“Makes sense.” He had jumped into a river, so he couldn't expect much else.

“I'm sorry... Because of me...” Elize lowered her head.

“It's fine. Don't worry about it.”

“But—”

“I'm alive, which means I can still write my future masterpiece. I've got loads of new ideas. I can write something even more incredible!” Bastian declared, thrusting a fist into the air. *The battle goes on!*

“When that happens... I'll definitely read it,” Elize said, tears welling up in her eyes.

“Yeah!”

“No matter how boring it is.”

“Oi, don't say that while crying! You make it sound boring as hell! It's not *that* bad, right!?”

Shia, who had been watching the whole interaction, let out a giggle. There was a wide smile spread across her face. “You two really

get along well. You're engaged, right?"

"...!?"

Bastian instinctively looked at Elize, but she had turned the other way at a surprising speed. Even looking at her from behind, he could tell that she was blushing—she was red to her ears.

If it embarrasses you that much, why was that the story you went for!?

Then again, it was a simple enough explanation for why she was traveling with a Belgian noble. That was why she had told the bearded coachman something similar.

According to Shia, this house had ties to both High Britannia and Belgaria. "The main house is currently Belgian nobility. However, back when we were still a part of a small country to the south, we thought our assets might be seized in war, so... fifty years ago, we set up a branch house in High Britannia."

"Hm... So the main family's in Belgaria, and this one's a branch."

"And thanks to that, we're conducting business on both sides. The situation is extremely favorable—that's what the master said, at least."

"Ah, right. I should greet the master here..."

"You can't get up yet," Elize interjected, "Besides, I've already given them our greetings. If you want, you can greet them personally once your wounds have healed."

"Oh, that so? Guess it does make sense to wait." He couldn't imagine anyone would want to be greeted by someone covered in blood.

"If you've got this much energy, you should be able to eat, right?" Shia stood. "The doctor said that, if you're able to, you should eat. I'll go and get you something."

"Thanks, that'd be a huge help."

"Don't worry about it."

With that, Shia left the room. Were they in the Tiraso Laverde family manor? Bastian could hear her footsteps very slowly fade as though she was walking down a long corridor.

He clenched his fists tight. "I'm sorry, Elize."

"There's nothing you need to apologize for."

"But... what day is it now!? What town are we in!?"

"Today is the 24th, and the Tiraso Laverde manor is located in Smiles Hill, south of Greybridge."

"...I was asleep for that long?"

"It's a miracle you're still alive with those injuries. You must be in a lot of pain right now."

"It's nothing serious."

"Well, I won't complain as long as you're properly healed up."

Elize was so kind. Why couldn't he grant her wish? This was the first time in Bastian's life that he had ever felt so outrageously

frustrated. He had failed. He was useless.

“...I couldn’t... get you there...”

“There was nothing we could have done.”

“But we... we worked so hard!”

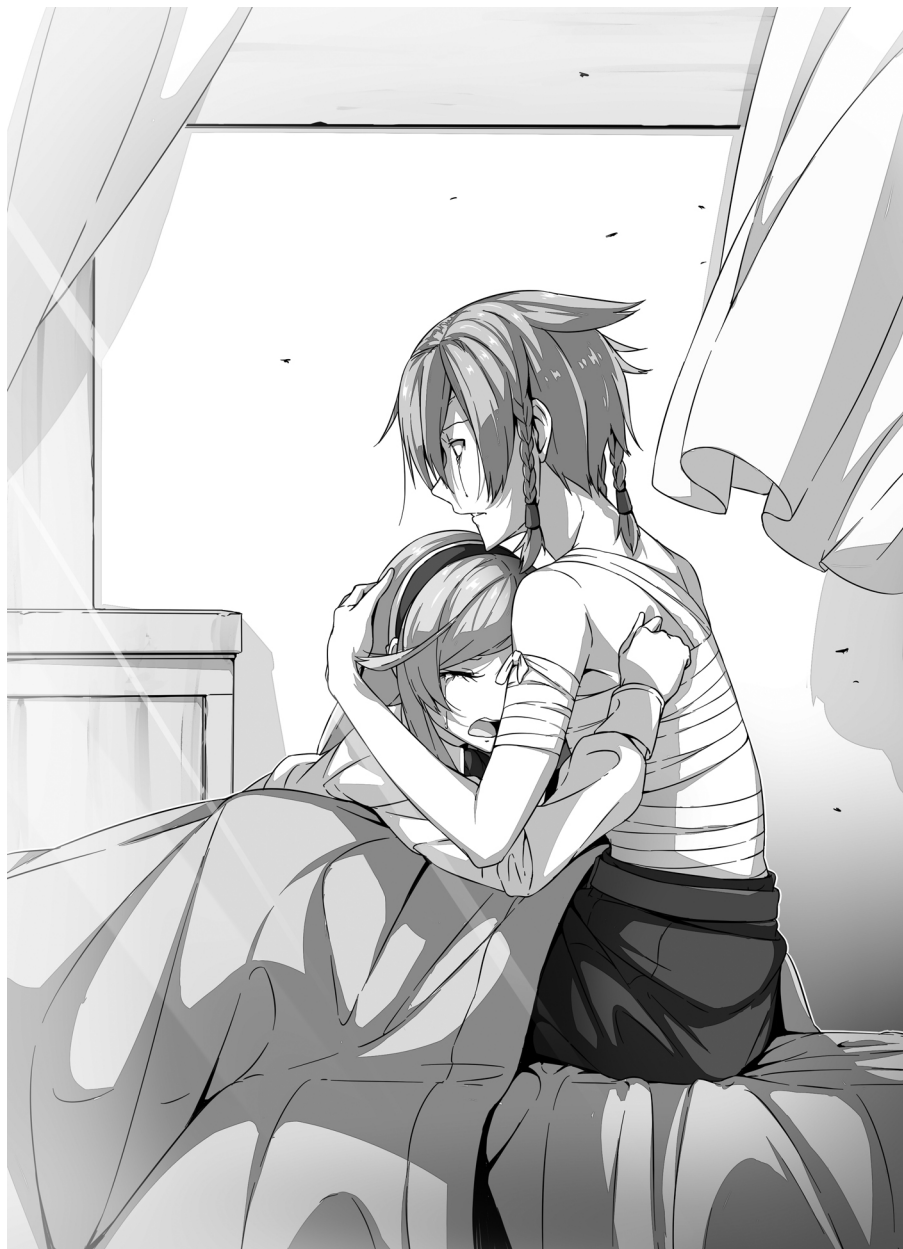
“It was my mistake to propose that we go to Fort Greybridge.

More so, Bastian, you were the one... who put in all the work... The knights, they...” Elize’s voice quavered, and tears began to drip down her face, one by one. “H-Her Majesty... She entrusted it to me, and yet... I lost her ring!”

“It’s all my fault!”

“Waaaaaah... I tried so hard... You tried so hard... Aaaaaah... I couldn’t do a single thing!”

Bastian held Elize close, and she held him back. They each clung to the other hopelessly, crying like children.



“I’m sorry, Elize...”

“Snff... No... I... It’s all my... Waaaaaah...”

“It’s because... I lost...”

What if I had beaten Oswald? Should I have studied more about High Britannia’s state of affairs? Had I just done a little bit of research before we went to the fort... Bastian could feel his regrets quickly overwhelming him.

Meanwhile, Elize continued to cry, blaming herself entirely. The girl who held but a single wish, who shouldered the expectations of so many, and had lost so much...

But no matter how much they cried, it wouldn’t change the cold reality—they had both failed.



When Elize had finally settled down, there was a knock at the door.

“It’s Shia.”

Perhaps she had been waiting in the corridor. Bastian wiped his eyes, and answered in as normal a voice as he could muster.

“...Come in.”

She entered carrying a tray. A gentle, salty scent came along with her.

“Eat up, Mr. Bastian. We have chicken stew and jacket potatoes. Take your time. Ah, and there’s enough for you too, Ms. Elize.”

“...Th-Thank you.”

“It’s fine. Now please cheer up.”

Bastian noticed a newspaper resting beside the food on the tray. He picked it up. “What’s this?”

“Oh, you’ve been out for four days, so the master said you might want to read it.”

“I see. Give him my thanks.” Bastian could already tell the news would not bring a smile to their faces. Even so, he had to make sure. He opened the paper, and with Elize looking over his shoulder, they read along together.

Queen Margaret Stillart Enthroned!

Stillart Year 42, April 23rd.

During the Daybreak Declaration, Parliament has announced the coronation of Her Majesty Margaret Stillart.

Her Majesty promises “assertive diplomacy for the stability and prosperity of our nation.”

Bastian continued holding the paper after he’d finished reading.

He couldn't accept it.

Pat. Pat. Pat. The sound of hurried footsteps grew nearer, and all of a sudden the door was forcefully thrown open without so much as a knock. It was another maid.

"Shia, big news!"

"What happened?"

"It's war! The men are raising a ruckus about it!"

On hearing this news, Shia opened the window. There was a large courtyard right outside the room, in which butlers, gardeners, and carpenters had gathered, all raising their voices. There were extras in their hands—thin newspapers for special occasions.

"It's war! The war has begun!" one man yelled.

"Yeah, it's finally here! We issued a declaration to Belgaria!" cheered another.

"The war has begun!"



Stillart Year 42, April 23rd—

The monarchy of High Britannia declared war on the Belgarian Empire. The next morning, they commenced an attack on the port of Ciennbourg in the territory of Duke Touranne. The Empire sent its Second Army to meet the attackers.



Their first land war in a neighboring territory, the Battle of Ciennbourg allowed High Britannia to demonstrate the overpowering might of its new cannons and rifles to the world. On the imperial side, Second Prince Latrielle, commander of the First Army, invoked the name of the emperor to issue an order to sortie.



High Britannia and Belgaria were thrust into an all-out war.

A History of the Belgian Empire

Glasses

In the year 851 on the Belgian imperial calendar (concurrent with Stillart Year 42), glasses were largely seen as a highly expensive luxury item. The lenses had to be made from very transparent glass or crystal, both of which were terribly hard to obtain and required a special set of skills to process. The craftsman would have to precisely shave away at the material by hand, then spend a great deal of time carefully polishing it, so they were consequently handled in the same way as rare gemstones and precious metals.

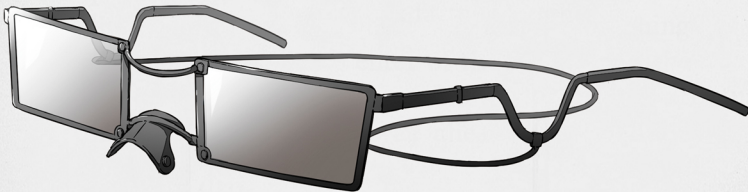
Glasses were first invented five hundred years prior, and while they were initially only used to treat presbyopia, by Altina's time, lenses were being fashioned to help those with myopia and astigmatism as well. Structure-wise, they were most commonly hung over the ears in the same way as modern glasses, but could be quite unstable due to the lenses being thicker and heavier. For this reason, some glasses were designed with handles that allowed the wearer to hold them in place, while others reduced the frame to a bare minimum to lessen the overall weight.

The glasses Bastian wore were sunglasses made of quartz fumé (smoky quartz). The crystals used to make glasses were all generally quartz—a compound of silicon and oxygen, and a crystallization of silicon dioxide. Only pure and highly transparent quartz was suitable for making lenses out of.

Occasionally, aluminium finds its way into the structure of quartz, leading to an imbalance of charge in its crystal lattice. Natural irradiation can then cause the oxygen atoms to eject an electron, allowing them to absorb a combination of wavelengths which in turn produces the dark, smoky color that quartz fumé is known for.

Incidentally, quartz fumé will lose its color if exposed to enough heat, and regain it if exposed to strong radiation—in fact, even the clearest of quartz crystals can be darkened by using sufficient radiation. The absence of equipment to artificially produce radiation in this era, however, meant that all quartz fumé used in this period was naturally occurring.

Gold and silver were generally preferred when it came to making frames for the glasses—not only were these materials easy to work with and less likely to bend or tarnish, but they were perceived as being incredibly high-class.



Bastian often wore sunglasses to conceal his red eyes, which were a sign of his royal heritage. This was a good idea in theory, but his conduct unfortunately rendered the gesture quite meaningless...

Rifles

High Britannia was ahead of every other nation in the world with its mass-production of breech-loading rifles. This was a period in time where other countries still tended to rely on flintlocks, but these were far more tedious to reload: one would first have to insert gunpowder down the muzzle, insert a round, and then spread gunpowder on the pan. What's more, as an external piece of flint had to be used to ignite the powder on the pan, the flintlock could be rendered completely useless by the weather.

The loading process could be simplified by inserting the gunpowder and round together in a paper cartridge, but even then, these guns were mostly effective in preemptive and surprise attacks. They could never become the centerpiece of the battlefield.

The rifles made in High Britannia used centerfire cartridges, and had helical grooves known as rifling inside the barrel to stabilize the projectiles and improve their accuracy—they truly were revolutionary. Each metal cartridge had a primer located at its base, which would ignite when struck by the firing pin. The process was completely contained, meaning it was unaffected by any outside elements. The breech-loading procedure was also much quicker than standard muzzle-loading and made it possible for a foot soldier to quickly load and fire while prone.

While other nations were also experimenting with both breech-loading and rifled barrels, they faced considerable issues when it came to their durability, upkeep, quality control, output, and accuracy. For this reason, they could not begin mass-producing them.

Around this same time, Belgaria developed and mass-produced the Minié ball, a type of ammunition designed for rifled, muzzle-loading muskets. These bullets resembled hollowed-out acorns. When the ball was fired, the pressure from the explosion would flatten the bottom to grip the gun barrel, making sure no force escaped, while the rifling successfully increased the accuracy. Unfortunately, the overall slow firing speed and problems caused by weather remained.

On a side note, Germania was actually the first nation to implement breech-loading guns. The story goes that they tried to improve upon the design in secret, but their performance in their usual civil wars was so suspiciously remarkable that their rivals immediately caught on and robbed their storehouses blind. From here, the technology quickly spread to other countries. Compared to those made in High Britannia, however, the breech-loading mechanism was allegedly too complicated to use and prone to breaking down, giving it a poor reputation among officers.

From this era onward, the development of firearms would continue at a breakneck pace, and it was only twenty years later that single bullets would be replaced by magazines. It would take a mere thirty years for fully automatic rifles to enter the scene.



Afterword

Thank you for reading Altina the Sword Princess IV!

This is the author, Yukiya Murasaki.

In the fourth volume, the mood and setting both change as the foreign student prince goes on a rampage across the sea. Here's hoping you enjoyed it.

This time I think we've come full circle, and we're finally starting to feel like a light novel. Our focus will return to Belgaria for the fifth volume.

Altina's army faces the Grand Duchy of Varden unprepared. Will Regis manage to successfully drive off the enemy forces in a single night?

On the western front, Latrielle faces Oswald! And a particular girl finally makes an appearance—it's Regis's older sister!

I don't know how many pages I'll get, but... I hope you'll stick around for the next volume.

My thanks—

To my illustrator, himesuz-sensei, thank you for all of the cool illustrations. To think Bastian was actually a hottie!

To Yamazaki-sama and Nishino-sama at Afterglow, thank you for yet another wonderful design.

To my editor, Wada-sama, it's all thanks to you that the book could be published on time.

To everyone in the Famitsu Bunko editorial department, everyone involved, and to my family and friends who supported me.

And of course, my greatest thanks to you, dear reader, for reading this far! Thank you!

Yukiya Murasaki

Congrats on releasing volume 4,
and thank you for
purchasing it!

Today
we've got
Lady
Elize



There were so many
new characters this time—
drawing them was
a breath of fresh air!

Murasaki-san,
Wada-san, thanks
for all the work you do.
Once again, I had a blast
doing the drawings.

phimsu





Bibliophagic Tactician
Regis

Sword-Wielding Princess
Altina

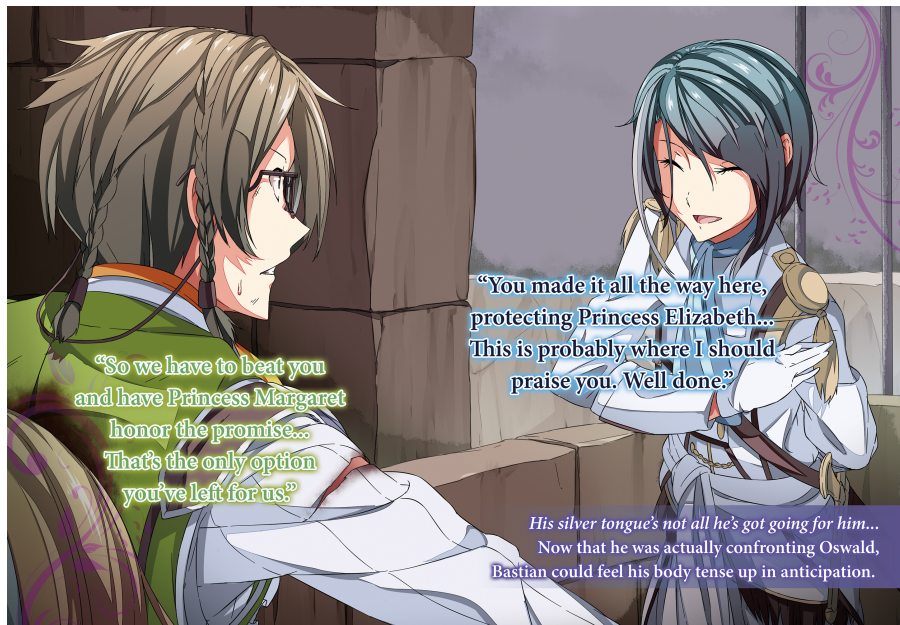
“Regis, what
do you think?”

“...I propose we
end things tonight.”

“Kukukuh...
So we’re going out, then?”

Banished Hero
Jerome





"So we have to beat you
and have Princess Margaret
honor the promise...
That's the only option
you've left for us."

"You made it all the way here,
protecting Princess Elizabeth...
This is probably where I should
praise you. Well done."

*His silver tongue's not all he's got going for him...
Now that he was actually confronting Oswald,
Bastian could feel his body tense up in anticipation.*

ALTINA the Sword Princess





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Altina the Sword Princess: Volume 4

by Yukiya Murasaki

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Illustrations by himesuz

HAKEN NO KOUKI ALTINA Vol. 4

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Tokyo

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CORPORATION, Tokyo

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Ebook edition 1.0: June 2020